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BASILE THE JESTER



He lay turned.

BASILE THE JESTER

A ROMANCE OF THE DAYS OF
MARY QUEEN OF SCOTS

BY

J. E. MUDDOCK

AUTHOR OF

'THE DEAD MAN'S SECRET,' 'MAID MARIAN AND ROBIN HOOD,' 'STORIES WEIRD
AND WONDERFUL,' 'FROM THE BOSOM OF THE DEEP,' 'MIDNIGHT,'
'FOR GOD AND THE CZAR,' ETC.

WITH A FRONTISPIECE BY STANLEY WOOD

LONDON

CHATTO & WINDUS, PICCADILLY

1896

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BASILE THE JESTER

CHAPTER I.

THE WOMAN IN THE CROWD.

‘VIVE le Dauphin et la Reine d’Écosse ; long live the Dauphin and Queen of Scotland ! Shout, good people ! Blend your voices in one mighty burst of enthusiastic joy ! Rend the air with the forcible expression of your feelings, for I vow this is the happiest day that has ever dawned on fair France. Huzza ! shout, I say. Wherefore dost thou laugh at me, good master blacksmith ? How do I know that thou art a blacksmith ? Because thou hast a leathery smell, and the wrinkles of thy face and neck are like the furrows of a ploughed field—they are full of dirt. Nay, lose not thy temper, thou beater of iron and maker of horseshoes. I am as good a man as thou art. Huzza ! Crack your lungs, dear people, for this is a right merry day. By my cap and bells, I vow I am so happy that I could e’en embrace that grimy blacksmith, though his face be somewhat uglier than yonder gargoyle.’

Thus spoke Basile, a jester at the Court of Henry II. of France, as he cut merry antics, for the amusement of the people, in front of the great cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris.

The year is 1558 ; the time, April 24. The occasion, the marriage of Mary Stuart, Queen of Scotland, with Francis, the eldest son of Henry II. of France. The weather is glorious, and spring has touched all Nature with a wand of gold. The soft azure of the sky is flecked with fleecy cloudlets, and the Seine, as it rolls its lazy course to the sea, reflects the blue and

white of the heavens in its unruffled surface, for of wind there is none. The air is stagnant and dreamy, and heavy with the perfume of the enormous masses of flowers, especially violets and primroses. Turn which way the eye will, there is a bewildering and dazzling display of colour. Flags and banderols by millions flutter from poles and lines. From the turrets of Notre Dame float the royal standards of France and Scotland, and there is not a house in the whole neighbourhood, nay, probably in all Paris, that is not decorated with bunting. The whole façade of the grand cathedral is covered with crimson cloth, intermixed with cloth of gold. Over the main entrance a gigantic arch of flowers has been constructed, the flowers used being violets, primroses, daffodils, snowdrops, and lilies of the valley. The effect of the combination is rich and chaste beyond all description. In front of this floral arch, and stretching the whole length of the cathedral front, is a raised platform covered with cloth of gold. The platform extends outwards for nearly fifty yards; then a flight of wooden steps descends to the ground. The steps are covered with crimson cloth, which is carried along for another hundred yards. Each side of this enormous platform is built up with artificial flower banks that are crowned with palms. An avenue, forty yards across, and extending for a quarter of a mile from the platform, is roped off, the rope being of crimson silk, in which is woven a gold thread. On each side of this avenue, at intervals of a yard, stands a halberdier, armed with a polished steel halberd, and clad from head to foot in polished steel armour. Between the soldiers, on both sides, kneels a beautiful girl, clad all in white, and enveloped in a gossamer veil. Each girl holds a basket of flowers, which are to be scattered over the crimson cloth when the royal pair leave the cathedral.

Outside of the rope, on either side, is a densely packed, gaily dressed and good-natured multitude. Every window of every house, as well as every roof, is also filled with sightseers. The lighthearted Parisians have turned out in their tens of thousands to make merry and do honour to the rare occasion. This day France and Scotland are united in the persons of the beautiful, gifted girl, Mary Stuart, and the handsome boy, the Dauphin now, but soon to be Francis II. of France. This day a page is being written in history that is destined to be ever a conspicuous one in the world's story.

Paris, used as she has been to see grand sights and rich

pageants, has never seen this one surpassed, nor probably even equalled. It is in keeping with the profligate and magnificent and luxurious Court of Henry II. No expense has been spared, nothing left undone to give imposing pomp to the ceremony, and to dazzle, with glittering and unique splendour, the eyes of all beholders.

The event which is being celebrated is one that the world has but rarely seen. Francis, the Dauphin, is heir to the throne of France, and Mary Stuart, although a minor, is the crowned Queen of Scotland. Thus, it is hoped, the two countries are wedded in a bond of the closest union, and the interests of the two thrones are identified. Mary is as yet little more than a child, being under fifteen, while the Dauphin is only slightly her senior. To matchless beauty she allies a grace and learning, combined with wit and talent, that are almost unparalleled even in an age celebrated for its clever women.

If the external scene on this auspicious day, with all its glittering wealth of colour and its military display, was striking, how much more majestic and imposing was that presented by the ceremony in the interior of the cathedral! Here the most awe-inspiring and religious songs, and the most impressive display of worldly treasures, were blended into a picture such as few human eyes had looked upon before. The whole of the nave of the great cathedral was hung with white satin, alternated with crimson velvet and cloth of gold, while the floor itself was completely covered with cloth of gold. The King and Queen of France were present in all the regal magnificence of state. They were surrounded by the princes of the royal blood and all the nobility, while priests and cardinals were present in hundreds. Three hundred beautiful youths, dressed in pure white raiment, swung golden censers, while a thousand trained voices chanted the impressive service. The proud Cardinal of Bourbon pronounced the nuptial blessing, and then the brilliant assembly, and the sweet young bride herself, hailed the Dauphin 'King of Scotland.'

While the marriage was thus being solemnized in the cathedral, Basile, with others of his class, was amusing the surging masses outside. Basile was a young man, probably under thirty years of age, with a shapely figure and an exceedingly handsome face. He came of a race of jesters; his father before him had been a jester in the Court of Francis I.

Basile, who was gaudily dressed, was strutting about on the crimson cloth as proud as a peacock. He wore a capote of orange-coloured silk, that came down over his shoulders in the form of a cape. His jacket was parti-coloured, one half being red, the other yellow, and one hose was blue, while the other was white.

As he paraded up and down with an assumed air of importance, he bandied jokes with the people, who made him a butt for their own coarse wit, and roared with laughter when he addressed them. Now and then he pretended to get very angry, and shook his bells in a menacing way. Like all Court fools, he was privileged to do and say almost anything he liked, but in return he had to take the buffets that were frequently bestowed upon him, and the scorn with which his class was universally treated. These hired buffoons could say things to a king that would cost another man his head; but their lives were hard, and frequently they died in poverty and disgrace.

Basile's sally about the blacksmith had caused much laughter, though the man whom he had addressed seemed ill-pleased, and retorted warmly :

'Go to, thou poor fool ! Thy wit is shrunken even as thine own shanks. I am no blacksmith, fellow, but a tailor.'

'A tailor ! Oh, oh, oh, oh !' laughed Basile. 'Well, now that I look at thee, I perceive clearly that thou art but the ninth part of a man. A tailor, pah ! Why dost thou not become a turnspit ?'

'Why a turnspit ?' roared the tailor, losing his temper.

'Because then thou wouldst only have the running to do, the basting would be done for thee by others.'

'Out on thee, thou scum of a scullion wench !' retorted the man, feeling uncomfortable at the fire of chaff that was now levelled at him from all sides.

Basile was in right merry mood, and seemed immensely amused by his own wit. Suddenly, however, the laughter died out of his face, and an expression that was half pain, half fear, came into it. His eye had caught somebody in the crowd. That somebody was a woman, but in the surging sea of humanity she was quickly swept out of sight again, until he himself doubted having seen her, for he muttered :

'No, it was a fancy. It could not be she ; and yet the face was—pshaw ! I am growing morbid. *She is dead.* He

seemed comforted by this reflection, and broke into laughter again, until, inadvertently, he trod on the toes of a stalwart halberdier, who, pushing him until he all but lost his balance, exclaimed irritably :

‘Fool, get out of the way!’

Recovering his equilibrium with wonderful agility, Basile stiffened his legs and hips, and then bending down his head, after the manner of an acrobat, he said, with mock reverence :

‘I obey thine order immediately, O mighty warrior, for I always haste me to get out of the way of evil things.’

This happy sally turned the laugh against the soldier, and the jester scored a point. And now the bells burst forth into jubilant melody, announcing that the Queen of Scotland had become the possessor of two thrones; while France’s prospective King was the husband of Scotland’s Queen. Then from the church there poured forth the crowd of nobles, the Dauphin and his beautiful young bride, surrounded by an armed guard of French nobility, leading the way. This was the signal for flowers to be showered down from the turrets and roof of the cathedral. There was a perfect storm of flowers, and the sun shining forth in unclouded splendour at this moment, and accentuating all the wonderful wealth of colour, and flashing in floods of dazzling light from the armour and weapons of the soldiers, completed a picture so gorgeous, so rich, so artistic in its magical blending of brilliancy and tone, of light and shade, that its equal had never been witnessed. While, mingling with the clashing of the bells, rose two thousand trained voices in a choral song of thanksgiving and joy.

Flushed with conscious pride, the beauteous Queen leaned on her husband’s arm, and gazed on the animated scene. Well might she feel proud at that happy moment, which gave no sound, displayed no sign, of the stormy future that was to be hers; nor did there loom in her vision of that which was to come, the block and axe which were to end her career, when, lonely, deserted, and broken-hearted, she would welcome death as a relief from weariness and pain.

She was tall and beautiful beyond compare. Her features were cast in a classical mould, her face was lighted up with rare intelligence. Her hands were elegantly shaped, her eyes piercing and keen. She was attired in a robe of white satin with a train many yards in length. The train

was borne by twelve maidens, six on either side. Each maiden wore a dress that was covered with natural flowers, most artistically arranged. Thus, one was primrose, another violet, a third lilies of the valley, a fourth tulips, and so on. The extreme ends of the train were borne by two beautiful boys dressed as Cupids. Round her brow Mary Stuart wore, clasped, a tiara of extraordinarily pure diamonds, and she was enveloped in a transparent veil of gossamer that was studded with seed pearls of great value.

At the sight of this bewitching girl, radiant with beauty that almost seemed unearthly, the dense masses of human beings, who everywhere pressed forward to obtain a sight, broke out into thunderous shouts of welcome, that were taken up and echoed and re-echoed from every balcony, every window, every roof, every point, in fact, where a human being could obtain a foothold. Hundreds of thousands of handkerchiefs and flags were waved, while the air was thick with flowers that were showered down by the people in their wild enthusiasm. The senses grew literally bewildered with all the motion, the glitter, and the tumult of bells, voices, and cannon which thundered forth salutes on each side of the flashing Seine.

Presently a superb coach, all gilt and crimson velvet, and studded with precious stones, and hung on high bow springs, was wheeled up in front of the platform. Into the coach the Dauphin and his bride stepped. It was drawn by twelve milk-white ponies with trappings of real gold lace, and white satin trimmed with imitation violets. The coach was preceded by a hundred mounted gentlemen clad in silver armour. On each side of the coach, mounted on white ponies, rode a jester, Basile being on the right; and as they moved along these men scattered pieces of money amongst the people, being provided with a bagful for the purpose. Following the coach came another bodyguard of a hundred nobles mounted on black horses and wearing gilt armour. In the rear of these were the King and Queen of France, each riding a splendid white horse that was covered with cloth of gold, while each horse wore on its forehead a diamond star of fabulous value, and its hoofs were shod with shoes of solid gold. The procession was brought up by the ladies and gentlemen of the Court, all dressed in the most gorgeous apparel; while two thousand troopers, wearing polished armour, formed the rear escort.

As this wonderful procession moved slowly along amid showers of flowers, the multitude of sightseers shouted themselves hoarse, and struggled to gain a nearer view. At one point of the route the pressure was so great that the line of soldiers was broken. And while the confusion thus caused was at its height, a woman with bare head, and a wealth of black hair streaming over her shoulders and down her back, was seen to be struggling frantically to get in front, holding a child up at arms' length. There was a wild expression in her face, which was red and blotched as if with dissipation. She was calling out at the top of her voice, but the roar of the surging people drowned what she said. Basile saw this woman, and the expression of fear that had suddenly come into his eyes when he was bandying words with the tailor came again, and he seemed to sway on his horse as if he were about to fall. Evidently the sight of that woman influenced him, and he looked nervously around as if meditating flight.

In the meantime the excitement amongst that section of the crowd increased. The soldiers were beating back the crowd with their hackbuts, and the people were growing angry. By what seemed almost superhuman strength the woman continued to force her way forward. So wild and excited did she appear that those near her thought she was mad, and many shrank from her. The child (a boy), which she still held up, was screaming lustily, evidently with fright, as well he might, for the hubbub, the confusion and excitement were tremendous. Women screamed and fainted, and men, being jostled roughly, lost their tempers and fought fiercely with each other, thus adding to the general alarm.

The procession had come to a standstill, and there was much curiosity expressed to know the cause of the disturbance. Basile by this time was deadly pale, and seemed strangely uneasy. He kept his eyes fixed on the struggling and apparently frantic woman, and the nearer she came the more alarmed he grew. It is difficult to understand what connection there could be between the handsome Court fool and this strange woman in the vast crowd; and yet there was the fact that her movements influenced him. The woman continued to struggle to the front, her objective point to all appearances being the coach in which sat the young Queen and the Dauphin, her husband. Her clothes were almost torn from her body, and were hanging in shreds, and perspira-

tion was streaming down her begrimed face. She succeeded at last in reaching the line of procession just where it had been broken by the inbursting of the mob. Several gentlemen forming the bodyguard were vainly endeavouring to restore order, but their horses, frightened by the swaying masses and the yelling and shouting of thousands of excited people, were prancing wildly, and their riders' attention was kept on the alert to prevent the restless steeds from trampling on the people.

As the woman gained the line, a halberdier seized her with the intention of thrusting her back. But with a shriek of defiance she twisted herself free from his grasp. In doing so, however, she lost her balance, reeled and stumbled, and there broke from her blanched lips an agonized cry of blank despair, for she had gone down amongst the prancing horses, and before a hand could be stretched to save her she was trampled upon and crushed into a bleeding mass.

Basile the fool witnessed her fall, and springing from his nag, he rushed forward, but too late to save the woman, if that was his intention. He snatched up the child, however, which, strangely enough, was uninjured, and holding the boy above his head, freed himself from the human tangle, and breathless and exhausted got back to the coach.

CHAPTER II.

THE SEAL OF DEATH.

BASILE was deathly pale. The excitement and the exertion he had gone through had perhaps caused this. But he was also strangely agitated, and his presence of mind seemed to have forsaken him. The child he had rescued was screaming furiously. It was a bright, curly-headed boy of about eight years of age.

'What is it, Basile—what is it, Basile?' asked the young bride, as she peered anxiously out of the coach.

'If it please you, madame, there has been an accident,' answered Basile, making a desperate effort to suppress his excitement and speak calmly, though his effort was a failure.

'An accident!' exclaimed the young Queen in distress. 'Mercy upon us! is that sweet child hurt?'

'No, madame,' Basile replied. 'He is frightened, but not hurt.'

‘How came you by him?’

‘I rescued him, madame, from the feet of the horses.’

‘Thou hast done well, Basile; but surely the poor child was not alone?’

‘No, madame, he was held by a woman—his mother, probably—and she has been killed.’

‘Killed!’ cried the Queen in great distress. ‘Alas, poor mother! Is there no one with her to claim the child, Basile?’

‘I think not, madame.’

‘Then, by the grace of God we will take him under our protection till his relations are found. What say you, dear husband?’ she asked, addressing the Dauphin.

‘Even as my sweet love says. Her wishes are mine.’

‘That is well,’ the Queen remarked. Then, turning to the jester, who still seemed excited and confused, she said: ‘Basile, motion one of our equerries that we desire speech with him.’

Basile did as he was told, but it was in a mechanical sort of way. An officer rode up and made a profound salute.

‘Sir,’ said the Queen, ‘it is our wish that this dear child, whose mother, alas! seems to have lost her life in the crowd, shall be well cared for. Give him into the care of one of our ladies-in-waiting, and later on we will issue a proclamation, if in the meantime his relations do not come forward to claim him.’

The equerry bowed, and, receiving the boy from the hands of Basile, he rode back and placed him in charge of one of the ladies-in-waiting, as the Queen had commanded.

While this little scene was being enacted, the mother of the child—if she were his mother—had been picked up and borne away by kindly hands. The people had been forced back into position again, and order being once more restored, the procession moved on. Basile had somewhat recovered himself, and having mounted his pony, he was making a sorry attempt at wit.

The stopping of the procession, and the news, which flew like wildfire, that a woman had been killed, had for a moment checked the ardour of the great crowd; but no sooner did the cavalcade get in motion once more than the enthusiasm of the people found renewed expression in a mighty upraising of tens of thousands of voices. Mary, Queen of Scots and Dauphiness of France, who had been temporarily depressed by the untoward incident—for she looked upon it as an evil

omen—quickly recovered her spirits as the thundering acclamations rang in her ears, and her eyes took in the marvellous scene. She felt proud and happy at this homage of a great people; and as she leaned on the luxurious cushions of the gilded coach, she dreamed of the pomp, the magnificence, and the greatness that would be hers. Meanwhile, the wretched woman who had been crushed beneath the horses' hoofs had been borne into a neighbouring house. It was found that, although she was fearfully injured and insensible, she was not dead. Somebody undertook to go in search of a surgeon, but the crowded state of the streets rendered this no easy task. When it became known, however, that a surgeon was required, a young man pushed his way through the crowd and offered his services, saying that he was a doctor. He was about six or seven and twenty years of age, and from his dress and general appearance he seemed to be in poor and needy circumstances.

Night had fallen on Paris, but the darkness was dispelled by the millions of small lamps which were used to illuminate the city, and by the great bonfires which burned in the squares; for the people were revelling, and the streets were filled with merry, noisy, chattering crowds. Seats and tables were placed in the streets, and the light-hearted people were feasting and drinking and thoroughly enjoying themselves in a reckless, rollicking way.

In a dismal room, high up in one of the lofty houses in the neighbourhood of Notre Dame, the woman who had been injured lay on a truckle-bed. It was the apartment of some kindly people who had placed it at the disposal of the poor creature, and having performed this act of charity, they were now enjoying themselves in the streets below, for it was not every day a royal marriage took place, and even a mangled human being could not be allowed to damp one's spirits. The ill-starred woman was young, certainly not more than thirty. She had been good-looking, if not positively handsome. Her hair was dark and luxuriant, and her features very regular. Her face was like marble now, and rendered ghastly by smirches of blood. One side of her head had been injured by the kick of the horse. Some of her ribs had also been broken, and had penetrated the lungs, and dark venous blood was oozing from the lips. In the room, which was faintly illuminated by a small oil-lamp, was the surgeon who

had volunteered his services. He was a man by no means ill-favoured so far as looks were concerned, but his face wore an expression of anxiety and traces of dissipation. There was nothing very striking about him. He was a common type of man, and, judging from his hungry look and threadbare clothes, 'he was suggestive' of one who was a butt of bad fortune. He was alone with his patient, for it was very difficult to get the services of anyone on such a night of revelry, especially as the prospects of remuneration were remote. Sometimes he walked up and down the room in a preoccupied sort of way; and at other times he sat by the bedside, and with the sponge wiped the oozing blood from the lips of the injured woman. He certainly was not mercenary, or he would not have been there, and his being there showed that he was of a kindly disposition. Occasionally he paused, as if listening to the roar of revel that came up from the street. And once, after so listening, he stamped his foot with impatience, and muttered in a tone of disgust:

'Pah, the canaille! How little it takes to turn them into swine! How the noise of their drunken mirth annoys me! They drown their cares and misery in wine, but I bear with mine as best I may. Heigho, it is an ill-world, and Fortune mocks those who sue to her. Will she ever favour me? Who knows but that this very accident may change my destiny? My attention to this wretched creature may possibly bring me under the notice of the Dauphin and the Dauphiness, for the young bride is sure to make inquiries about the poor woman.' He seated himself beside the bed, and gazed for some time on the sufferer. Then he continued his musing: 'I wonder who and what she is? She has had a fair face, and is young and shapely of limb. I should like to know her history.'

He was about to rise, when he noticed that her eyes were open, and she appeared to be looking at him. He wiped her lips and sponged her forehead with cold water. Then he administered a stimulant, which she drank eagerly, and her breathing, which had been stertorous and laborious, became more natural. It was evident that she was conscious, and she appeared to be making an effort to speak. Seeing this, he bent his head down, and presently she muttered indistinctly:

'I have been hurt.'

She spoke with great difficulty, and gave indications that she was suffering extreme pain.

'Yes,' he answered, 'you *are* injured.' Then after a pause, and as if deeming it better that she should know the worst, he added: 'Your injuries are grave in character, and I fear me that your hours are numbered.'

She did not seem in the least degree affected by the information, but putting forth her cold, white hand, she touched his arm, and said:

'I feel *that*. I know that my hurts will prove fatal. Perhaps it is better so. But tell me, who are you?'

'I am a surgeon, and freely give my poor services, hoping by the will of God to restore you.'

Something like a bitter smile passed over her bloodless face as she remarked:

'But you find I am too much broken ever to be mended. I am broken here, too;' and she placed her hand over her heart, and drew a sigh which caused her to moan from pain in the wounded lungs.

'Can I do aught to comfort you?' he said tenderly, much moved by her condition and her suffering. 'Shall I get you the services of a holy father or a *sœur de charité*?'

'No,' she said quickly; 'I trust in Heaven; and ere you could return from searching for a priest to shrive me I should be dead. But you can give me comfort in the short time that remains to me.'

She spoke spasmodically and with great difficulty, and every now and then gulps of blood came into her throat, all but suffocating her. He saw that her end was rapidly approaching, and seized with a sudden desire and curiosity to know who and what she was, he said:

'Speak quickly, ere the little remaining strength left to you ebbs away.'

It seemed at that moment as if her last word had been spoken, for a glaze came into her eyes, and blood poured from her mouth. He gave her some cordial, however, and she rallied and spoke, but with still greater effort and difficulty.

'Are you honest?' she asked.

'I hope so. As honest as a man can be in so wicked a world,' he replied, feeling that her question presaged a revelation.

'And faithful?' she continued.

'Even faithful also, as I believe.'

'I am dying, and friendless,' she said; 'and you ~~are~~ a

stranger ; but even a stranger may have pity on a crushed and much-wronged woman. I had determined this morning to personally make my plaint to the sweet Dauphiness. She is young and beautiful and a bride, and happy and free from care, and I feel sure she would pity me and aid me. But tell me,' she exclaimed suddenly, 'what of my boy ; he was surely not injured ?'

'Calm yourself. Not a hair of his head was injured, and he is in the dear young Queen's keeping.'

The poor dying woman uttered a cry of joy at this information ; but the cry was stifled by the surging blood, and turned into a wail of pain as the effort produced excruciating agony in the torn lungs.

For fully ten minutes she seemed to literally wrestle with death, and the surgeon expected every gasp she gave would be her last ; but once more she rallied, and wearily turning her dying eyes upon him, she whispered, so faintly that he was obliged to put his ear close to her lips to catch the words her fleeting breath formed :

'Fearing that I should not be allowed to speak to the Dauphiness this morning, I wrote a letter intending to put it into her hands, in the hope that my sad story would move her to see justice done to me. If that letter has not been taken from me, or is not lost, you will find it in the bosom of my dress. Promise me solemnly—promise me, a dying woman, that you will with your own hand deliver that letter to the Scottish Queen.'

'I promise you,' he said with great solemnity, and a degree of earnestness that evidently struck her, for she pressed his hand with her feeble fingers, and said :

'The Blessed Virgin be praised ! Now indeed I can die happy.'

The effort that this cost her again increased the hæmorrhage, and her face was contorted with pain. Used as the young surgeon was to death-bed scenes, he was nevertheless deeply moved at this poor creature's atrocious sufferings. And as the roar of the thoughtless multitude floated up, he displayed great irritability, for here in the awful presence of death the shouts of gaiety and pleasure seemed to him incongruous. Moved by sympathy, he took her cold hand and pressed it between his own. This poor creature was an utter stranger to him. She was a waif whom the current of events had drifted into his path. But he himself was poor, friend-

less, and sick to weariness with struggling against adverse circumstances. For he had no patron, no one in high place to give him a friendly lift, and so perforce had to feed on his own heart in nameless' obscurity. He had a fellow-feeling, therefore, for the strange woman around whom the impenetrable shadows were closing. The world had used her ill, and that fact in itself was sufficient to beget his true sympathy, even if the physical agony she was enduring had not done so. He felt, too, that his skill was set at naught, and that he was powerless to even ameliorate her sufferings. He did, however, administer some more cordial to her, and it appeared to have a slightly tranquillizing effect. Utter prostration had set in, and she lay motionless save for the twitching of the muscles of the face, which was due to spasms of pain. She lay like this for about a quarter of an hour. Then she raised her white, heavy eyelids, turned her fast-glazing eyes upon him, and, making a supreme effort, uttered in audible tones the one word—'Remember.'

The eyelids dropped again, she gradually sank into a comatose state, and in half an hour more was dead.

'Poor thing!' the surgeon said piously. 'The saints receive you, and God rest your soul.'

He remained motionless for some minutes until he remembered the letter she had referred to. He had no difficulty in finding it: It was in a pocket in the inside part of her dress. It was a large, square letter, folded, and tied with a piece of blue silk ribbon, and superscribed in a small neat hand 'To her most gracious, and wise, and beautiful majesty, Queen of Scots and Dauphiness of France, who is beseeched in the name of the dear Virgin Mary to read this letter.'

The surgeon went under the little oil-lamp and read the superscription, turning the letter round with prying curiosity.

'I wonder what it is about,' he muttered. Then with an exclamation of annoyance—annoyance with himself—he suddenly thrust it into the pocket of his cloak, as if wishing to put temptation away. He paced up and down the room, evidently ill at ease. Suddenly he stopped, and reproduced the letter. Temptation was conquering him. He stood irresolutely, and for some minutes held the missive between his thumb and finger. 'Pshaw!' he exclaimed. 'This is probably the story of that poor dead waif. Why shouldn't I know it?'

He satisfied his conscience with this reflection, and, hesi-

tating no longer, untied the ribbon and opened out the folds of the paper. It was a large sheet, such as was usually used for letters of importance, and it was filled up with fine writing. As the surgeon read, his face seemed to undergo many changes. Astonishment, pleasure, cunning, exasperation, maliciousness, were in turn depicted on his countenance, and when he came to the last line of the writing, some absorbing thought was in his mind, for he crumpled the letter in his hand, his lips were set with some half-formed resolution, his eyes burned with internal excitement. Presently he stamped his foot, and muttered :

‘Why did I yield to temptation, and read this?’

He straightened the sheet of paper out again, and tied it up with the ribbon, and then, as if he wanted air, he went to the small diamond-paned window, threw it open, and leaned out in an attitude of reverie.

It was a long way to the street below, and the roar of the mighty multitude was like the fretting surf on a rocky shore. The sky was cloudless, and the moon had the appearance of a silver shield. Paris itself, with its tortuous streets and far-reaching environs, was suggestive of a map traced in fire ; for the small lamps used for the illuminations stretched for miles and miles in unbroken lines, crossing and recrossing each other at various angles, until the eye was bewildered with the ravel of the threads of light. At various points huge bonfires blazed and made great circles of lurid glow in the landscape. In addition to this, there were long, moving rows of lights as mummers on horseback, and carrying waxen torches, wended their way slowly through the densely packed thoroughfares. From the island in the Seine, discharges of fireworks took place every now and again. There were great bursts of blood-red flame, fiery darts, revolving wheels, glowing stars, fiery serpents, and the thunderous roar of cannon and bombs. Mingling with all this were yells and screams of excited people, and loud laughter, and the blowing of trumpets. Revel and song and music, and the clashing of bells from every steeple in the city, filled the air with a deafening and bewildering clamour. The surgeon gazed on the marvellous scene before him ; then he turned his eyes to the still more marvellous scene of the dark blue heavens, where burned the glorious and mysterious stars, and the regal moon was like unto a disc of burnished silver. Presently he muttered to himself meditatively :

'What a strange world this is! How lightly these tens of thousands of people take their pleasure and abandon themselves to the hour, as though there were no to-morrow, no shadows, no intrigue, no deception, no wickedness, no heart-aches and bitterness worse than death! There is true peace there,' indicating the white corpse on the bed, 'and there,' looking down on the throbbing world at his feet, 'is hot blood and human passions, hatred and uncharitableness, and the hollow mockery of hypocrisy.'

He remained silent for some time, his eyes fixed on the Seine, where, catching in its ripples the light of the moon, it looked like a wrinkled mirror.

'Shall I tempt fate?' he murmured after a time. 'Pshaw! how should I tempt fate, for has not fate placed a golden opportunity in my hands to-night? Fortune has buffeted me hitherto. This day destiny threw that poor woman in my way. The information contained in her letter may give me a chance to rise. Shall I avail myself of that chance? There are heights to be reached by ambitious and daring men. Why should I not attempt to reach them? This woman was friendless; so am I. Her death may give me new life, and by a bold move I may emerge from obscurity.'

He turned from the window, and paced up and down for a few minutes. He was evidently ill at ease. He was wrestling with himself—wrestling with some feeling that was, so to speak, his better self. He stopped before the corpse. He gazed intently on the rigid, white, ghastly face, with its half-opened eyelids showing the glazed eyeballs, and its stony expression of intense agony, which death had not softened away.

'Poor thing!' he mused, 'shall I profit by your misfortunes? The dead tell no tales; and those cold blue lips of yours will never be able to impeach me.'

He drew forth the letter once more, and re-read it. Then, as he restored it to his pocket, there was a look of stern determination on his countenance.

'I will attempt to climb,' he muttered, 'even though in so doing I fall to my death.'

He covered up the face of the dead woman—put on his cloak, went down the many wooden stairs, and drifted out into the human current that was flowing through the street.

CHAPTER III.

'I KNEEL AND SALUTE YOU AS MY GOOD ANGEL.'

ALTHOUGH on the morning following her marriage the Dauphiness of France was much occupied in receiving the congratulations of the ambassadors from various courts, and giving audience to the commissioners from Scotland, she did not forget her protégé, and, sending for the lady-in-waiting who had charge of the boy, she made inquiries respecting him.

'He is a sweet babe, madame,' said the lady, 'and full of pretty prattle. But he sadly lacks strength, as if he had been ill-nourished. Nay, I am sure that that is so, for he has taken food ravenously.'

'What age has he, think you?' asked the Queen.

'An it please you, your Grace, I should say he has well-nigh completed his eighth year.'

'And speaks he well?'

'He has said but little, madame, for he has cried incessantly for his mother.'

'Alas, poor mother! alas, poor child! Has any news been obtained of the injured woman?'

'As your Grace's message reached me, I heard that a man had arrived at the palace and craved audience with you, madame. He also brought the news that the woman died a few hours after receiving her grievous hurt.'

The Queen seemed much distressed at this intelligence, then, turning to the lady, she asked:

'Is the man who has arrived a relation of the dead woman?'

'I know not, madame; but, an it please your Grace, I will learn his business and acquaint you with it.'

'That shall you do, and you shall bring me the news within an hour.'

The lady bowed, and retired to execute her commission, and Mary Stuart proceeded with her husband to give audience to many important personages who were waiting to be admitted to her presence, including a special emissary from the Pope.

The man alluded to by the lady-in-waiting was none other than the surgeon, who had arrived at the palace in good time in order that he might forestall any proclamation being issued,

which, under the circumstances, it was to his interest to prevent, if possible.

This man's name was Philippe Renaud. He was a member of an old and honourable, but exceedingly unfortunate family. They had been strong partisans and politicians, and as they generally managed, somehow, to be on the wrong side, they had suffered accordingly. Philippe's father had been secretly assassinated by some fanatic when Philippe was but a few years old. Soon after this his mother died from grief, and he, being an only child, was brought up by a poor but proud aunt, who on very slender means managed to educate him, and send him to Paris to study the art of surgery. But while he was yet young this aunt died, and the youth was left without means or friends to fight his way as best he could. And hard indeed the fight had been; for a poor and nameless man had little chance in days when patronage was considered of more consequence than talent.

The young lady into whose charge the boy had been given was Adrienne de Bois. She was a great favourite with the Queen of Scots, whose senior she was by about five years. She was at the Court when Mary Stuart arrived, so that they had grown up together, and a firm friendship existed between them.

Adrienne had the misfortune to be exceedingly plain. Certain people who envied her the position she occupied, as confidential maid-in-waiting to the young Queen, went so far as to say that she was positively ugly. Fine, dark flashing eyes and white, even teeth were her chief charms; in all other respects her features would not bear criticism. She had a winsome manner, however, and was patient and gentle. Owing to her want of beauty, she had been somewhat put upon, and made a drudge of by her companions, and no doubt that was one of the reasons which induced Mary Stuart to extend her patronage and friendship to her. In return, Adrienne had given her young mistress faithful and grateful service.

When Adrienne left the Queen's presence, she went at once to the chamber where Philippe Renaud was waiting the result of his application for permission to see her Grace. He had obtained entrance by stating that he had come in reference to the child whose mother had been killed on the previous day.

'I am commanded by the Dauphiness, sir, to learn your

business,' said Adrienne, addressing Philippe, who had risen and made a profound bow as she entered.

He was pale and agitated, and his eyes wandered about restlessly, as though he felt out of place.

'Is it not possible, mademoiselle, for me to see her Highness?' Philippe asked in tremulous and nervous tones.

'I fear not, unless your business is of a most urgent character. But I am her confidante, and you may safely make me the bearer of your message.'

Renaud rested his eyes on Adrienne's face for some moments, then he asked with great eagerness:

'You say you are her Highness's confidante?'

'Yes.'

'And have influence with her?'

'To some extent I have,' Adrienne replied cautiously.

'Then let me plead to you, mademoiselle,' said Renaud, dropping on one knee and bowing his head after the manner of a suppliant; 'let me plead to you, in the fervent hope that you will carry my prayer to the Dauphiness. Your beauty and your gentle manner assure me that I shall find in you a sympathizer at least, if not a friend.'

Adrienne de Bois was flattered, for it was not often compliments were paid to her.

'You seem in trouble, and to have sorrow,' she remarked; 'therefore, if I can serve you in aught I will do so.'

'Ah! I knew that your sweet face bespoke a heart all goodness and charity. I am stricken with a grievous sorrow, sweet lady. The world is against me, and misfortune has crushed me.'

'Nay, say not so,' replied Adrienne sympathetically. 'The world is surely against no man who is honest, and a strong man should defy misfortune.'

'Alas! mademoiselle, I have found the world very cruel, and the crowning misfortune came to me yesterday when my dear wife was crushed to death in the procession.'

'Your wife!' exclaimed Adrienne.

'Even so, sweet lady.'

'Then, the sweet child who is now in my keeping is your son?'

'He is, mademoiselle,' Renaud answered in a low tone.

Adrienne interpreted his agitation and confused manner to the sorrow he felt as he thought of his loss, and she was touched.

'Poor boy!' she remarked, alluding to the child; 'sad indeed it is when so young a babe lacks a mother's care.'

'Ay, lady, sad it is,' Renaud sighed.

'Do you wish to remove him now?' Adrienne asked.

'If her Grace so wills it, then must I comply,' said Renaud. 'But, lady, I am very poor.' Fortune has passed me by, and bitter poverty and I have long been companions. 'Tis better that I and my child find relief beneath the waters of the Seine.'

'Speak not in such a manner, sir,' Adrienne exclaimed with warmth. 'A man who is yet in his first manhood should not talk so glibly of destroying the life which God has given him, and much less of taking that of so sweet a child.'

'Better to give him peace if I cannot give him bread,' whimpered Renaud.

'Better to give him a stout heart and resolution to carve his way in the world,' Adrienne cried indignantly. 'Nay, I think now that you are not fit to have control of your boy in your present frame of mind, and I must in duty speak to my dear mistress, the Dauphiness.'

'You shall do with me or my child what you will,' said Renaud, in a well-affected tone of despair.

'What trade have you, sir?' Adrienne asked.

'I have the trade of a surgeon, lady.'

'Of a surgeon, say you? In faith, then is surgery in a sorry plight if it has done no better for you than that which you represent to me.'

'I have lacked patronage, mademoiselle,' replied Renaud, 'and I have struggled in vain against an adverse tide. Hunger and want have almost made me hopeless, and in the extremity of my bitterness and grief I beseech her Grace the Dauphiness to give me some chance of bettering my condition.'

'That I am sure she will do,' said Adrienne, speaking in a kindly tone again; 'that is, if you are deserving of it. I shall carry to the Queen a faithful account of what you have said, and I doubt not that in very gratitude for the great happiness she is now experiencing she will endeavour to relieve you of some of your misery.'

'Heaven decree that it may be so!' Renaud exclaimed; 'but tell me, lady, can I not approach the Queen's Majesty myself, and with my own lips tell my own story?'

'That I know not, but I will plead your cause.'

'Let me inquire, also, to whom I am indebted for greater

'kindness than I have ever met before. I crave the honour of knowing your name.'

'I am called Adrienne de Bois, and I am maid-in-waiting to the Dauphiness.'

'Adrienne de Bois, I kneel and salute you as my good angel,' said Renaud impressively, as he suited the action to the word, and, kneeling before her, touched with his lips her jewelled white hand.

She was by no means displeased with this act of homage, and she began to feel more interest in the man.

'Rise,' she said, 'and I will conduct you to where your child is bestowed. He will be no less joyed to see you than you to see him.'

'Ah, Mademoiselle Adrienne,' moaned Renaud, rising to his feet, 'I almost fear I have allowed my sorrows to make me for the moment forgetful of my little François. But it is long since I saw him—four years come Martinmas.'

'Four years!' exclaimed Adrienne, turning in astonishment, as she was in the act of leaving the room. 'How comes it so?'

'Because, lady——' Here Renaud hesitated and got confused again. He had thought out the part he had set himself to play, and he knew perfectly well that it would be necessary to state that he had not seen the child he was claiming as his son for a long time, otherwise the boy would refuse to acknowledge him as his father. But he had neglected to invent a plausible reason for so long a separation. But now, as he rapidly grasped the position he was in, and saw the prospects of realizing his daring scheme endangered by his want of a reason, he proved himself to be a man of ready resource as well as an unscrupulous one. 'Up to yesterday,' he continued, after a pause, 'I foolishly thought that François was not my son. I don't know how nor when this idea first came into my head, but for four years it has haunted me like a pitiless demon, throwing a great shadow over my life, and goading me into despair. So for all those years I have refused to look upon the face of the boy, and I held myself aloof from my unhappy wife.'

'Oh, green-eyed monster!' cried Adrienne bitterly, 'how much misery art thou responsible for in this world! But what of thy suspicion, Monsieur Renaud—was it justified?'

'In faith, no,' he answered, bowing his head as if in contrition. 'Yesterday I learnt how great had been the wrong I

had done my sweet wife ; for when she lay in the agonies of death, and knew that all hope for her in this world had passed, she vowed to me solemnly, and in the name of the blessed Virgin, that she was an honest woman. I repent me of my cruel suspicion, and my tears testify to my sincerity.'

With the consummate art of a perfect actor, he assumed an expression of weeping, and threw into his voice a tremulousness that was well calculated to deceive. He even surprised himself by his success. It was his first step in anything like real deception, and as he saw that that step was likely to lead him towards the heights on which he had cast longing eyes, he became more bold and reckless. The first plunge was over, and now by striking out fearlessly he might swim to fortune, if not to greatness.

Adrienne was much touched by his apparent sincerity and sorrow, and she said in tones which told that she herself was affected :

'Alas ! repentance cannot give you back your wife, nor wipe out those four years' wrong and misery. But there ! I have no right to judge you. Come, now, and, looking upon your sweet child's face, vow to devote your life to him, and to pray ceaselessly for the repose of the soul of the poor woman whom your unfounded suspicions wronged.'

She led the way out of the room, and Renaud followed her. A smile of triumph played about the corners of his mouth, for he felt that in the soft-hearted Adrienne de Bois he had made a valuable ally, and he resolved to use her.

CHAPTER IV.

'IT IS NOW OR NEVER TO SIT BESIDE THE STARS.'

ADRIENNE led the way to a small tapestried chamber, where on a luxurious couch lay François the child, while an old woman sat beside him, and was doing what she could to amuse him.

François seemed to have got over his fright of the previous day, and was laughing at some grotesque story the old nurse had been telling him. He was a remarkably pretty child, with a mass of brown curly hair. His skin was almost as fair as a girl's, and his features were not only regular, but gave indications of precocity and intelligence. He had bright,

flashing brown eyes, and a mouth that suggested determination and even obstinacy. He looked older than his years, but this was due, no doubt, to a certain meagreness arising from the want of proper nourishment.

'Well, nürse, how fares thy charge now?' said Adrienne, as she entered.

'Right well, my lady,' answered the old woman. 'He is a bonny bairn, and sharp beyond his years.'

'Here is his father,' Adrienne remarked. 'They are almost strangers to each other, for, as I understand, they have been separated for four years.'

The old woman rose, bowed stiffly, and exclaimed:

'Mon Dieu! Is that possible?' Then, noticing Renaud's broken-down and generally seedy appearance, she added: 'It might be well for the boy's sake, perhaps, had they remained separated for yet another four years.'

'Augustine,' cried Adrienne rebukingly, 'how dost thou dare venture on such a remark?'

'Nay, pardon me,' answered the old woman contritely. 'I meant no offence; but I thought that if the child remained an orphan, the dear Dauphiness would bestow upon him her gracious care.'

'Even as it is that may be so,' said Adrienne. Then, turning to Renaud, she said: 'I promised her Grace the Dauphiness to return to her in an hour and tell her what I had learned. Remain here, therefore, until I come back.'

'Report me well to her Grace I crave you, sweetest lady,' cried Renaud, 'and I shall ever be your willing and devoted servant, an it would so please you to accept my servitude. But in the meantime may I request to be left alone with my child?'

Adrienne looked at old Augustine, as if she wasn't quite sure how she should act. And Augustine, drawing herself up proudly, and looking somewhat indignant, remarked:

'An it is your command, mademoiselle, I will of course retire, but I would prefer to remain.'

'Nay, good Augustine, it is but natural that this poor man should wish to be alone for a brief space with his own offspring. Besides, he has sad news to impart,' she added, lowering her voice.

The old nurse at once understood, and, bowing, immediately left the room.

'Where has she gone to?' cried little François, springing up on the couch.

'She will be back anon, sweet pet,' answered Adrienne soothingly, as she patted the little fellow's head. 'And in the meantime this gentleman is going to talk to you.'

The boy looked at Renaud for a moment. Then he shrank back, and said peevishly:

'I don't know that gentleman; I don't like his looks. I don't want him to talk to me.'

'Be good, little one. It is right that this gentleman should talk to you,' Adrienne remarked kindly. 'Then, not wishing to have a scene, and as the hour in which she had promised to go back to the Queen was already up, she turned to Renaud, and said, 'Au revoir, monsieur. I will plead your cause to the best of my poor ability.'

In another minute she had left the room, and Renaud was alone with the child whose father he was claiming to be, but on whom he had never before cast his eyes.

'My plot works well,' he thought. Then, seating himself by the side of the couch, he attempted to take the boy's hand; but the child drew back, and, crouching in the corner of the couch, said fretfully:

'Go away—go away, monsieur; I don't like you. You make me frightened.'

'Nay, my pretty François,' answered Renaud, 'say not so. I am your papa.'

'Then indeed are you a wicked man, for I have heard my dear mamma often say so.'

Renaud was a little disconcerted by this remark, but he said coaxingly:

'Poor mamma! She could not have meant what she said! There were certain things between me and your mamma that caused a misunderstanding. You are too young to comprehend these things now, but some day I will tell you all.'

François turned his wondering eyes on the speaker, and asked: 'Wherefore do you not tell me now? I am sure I should understand.'

'No, my poor boy, I must not tell you now. Some day when you are older you shall know, but not now—not now.'

François was silent for some minutes. He seemed to be pondering something in his childish mind. Suddenly he exclaimed:

'Where is my dear mamma? Why does she not come to me?'

Renaud considered before speaking what answer he should give. Then, assuming a tone of deep sorrow, he replied solemnly, as he laid his hand on the child's fair head:

'Your mamma, darling, will come no more. She has gone to God.'

Into the boy's face as these words were spoken there came a look of blank amazement. He seemed puzzled and distressed. Then the truth appeared to dawn upon him; his beautiful soft brown eyes filled with tears, and with a childish wail he cried:

'Oh, mamma, mamma, my dear mamma! why have you left your little François? Let me go to God too, so that I may be with mamma.'

Renaud was really touched, showing thereby that, though he was playing a part in which hypocrisy and deceit were essential to his success, his heart was not yet hardened. He felt his own eyelids quivering, and catching the boy in his arms, he pressed him to his breast.

In the meantime, Adrienne de Bois had proceeded to the Queen's reception-room, where Mary, fatigued and exhausted with the ceremonies she had had to go through, was enjoying a little repose in the company of her husband and some of the ladies and gentlemen of the Court. Small silver cups of wine were being handed round, and Basile the Jester was endeavouring to amuse the company by his wit. But he seemed ill at ease and absent-minded, and his face was filled with an expression of anxiety that was altogether foreign to it. The Dauphiness had chided him two or three times for being 'dull as a mawkish owl,' and he had excused himself by saying that his nerves were yet strained from the shock they had received on the previous day.

'Ah, here is Mademoiselle Adrienne!' exclaimed the young Queen as that lady entered. 'She will entertain us, I'll warrant me. Well, and what news dost thou bring, Adrienne?'

'I have done your Grace's bidding, madame.'

'And with what result?'

'With the result that I come to plead to your Grace on behalf of the poor man whose wife was killed yesterday. In truth his story is a sad one. He is a scholar and a surgeon, an it please you. But buffets and misfortune have made him

very despairing. He is poor and friendless, and has not even the wherewithal to get that which would put flesh upon his scantily-covered bones.'

'God's truth, but the poor man shall not long be in so sorry a plight!' exclaimed the Dauphin. 'Sir,' turning to one of his gentlemen-in-waiting, 'see that my purse-bearer gives this unfortunate wretch golden pieces enough to ensure him ample food for a year at least.'

'Not so fast, dear husband,' put in the Queen. 'Let us hear what else Adrienne has to tell. By my faith, I am interested in this stranger. Where left you him, Adrienne?'

'With his child, madame.'

'His child!' echoed Basile the Jester in such a strangely hollow voice that all eyes were instantly turned to him. His face was white. He seemed to be suffering pain, and his bells fell from his trembling hand, with a jangling sound, on to the floor.

'Why, what ails the poor fool?' exclaimed the Queen. 'I vow that thou hast caused my heart to leap into my mouth.'

'Then, indeed, madame, you have the sweetest and most precious morsel in your mouth that ever has been there,' Basile replied, with a profound bow, and by this apt reply smoothed the Queen's slightly ruffled feelings. And, snatching up his dropped bells, he broke into a forced laugh, and said: 'When I caused your Grace's dear heart to perform such an extraordinary acrobatic feat, I was but wondering why so needy a sinner as this stranger is should be blessed with so sweet a child.'

'Then, in future, fool, let not thy wondering find vent in words so gruesomely uttered,' the Queen remarked.

'I shall remember your Majesty's command,' Basile answered, as he made a low bow and retired behind the Queen's chair.

'Seems he fond of the child?' the Queen asked, addressing herself to Adrienne.

'He was much affected, madame,' Adrienne replied, 'and the sad loss of his wife appears to weigh heavily upon him. I would, an it should please your Grace, crave that he be permitted to tell his own story. In very truth he is to be pitied.'

'You seem interested in this scholar and surgeon,' the Queen said, uttering the words 'scholar and surgeon' somewhat sarcastically.

'He is a scholar, madame, as you yourself may judge,'

Adrienne replied in a tone that showed she understood the Queen's sarcasm, 'and should your Grace be desirous of proving his skill in surgery, your Grace will be able to devise the means thereto.'

'Nay, rate me not uncharitably, sweet Adrienne,' answered the Queen smilingly, as she noticed that her favourite was a little hurt. 'Thy penetration, I know, is keen, and thy opinion reliable; therefore, I will see this poor man. Conduct him hither, Adrienne, while I have leisure to receive him; and I swear by my father's memory that if he be what you deem him he shall not lack food and raiment henceforth.'

'Will you see him now, your Grace?'

'Ay, at once. What say you, husband of mine?'

'Ever as your Highness wishes.'

'Haste, then, good Adrienne, before our leisure hour has expired,' said the Queen.

Mademoiselle de Bois experienced a sense of delight at having gained her object, for as she had interested herself in Renaud, she was anxious to bring him under the personal notice of the Queen. But, after all, it was not so much the man she thought of as the child. Being herself without fortune and without beauty, she believed that she was destined to lead a single life, and therefore a very womanly feeling caused her to yearn for something on which to bestow her affection. What else better could she find than a child suddenly deprived of a mother's care? She could teach him and train him, and watch over his welfare; and employing her mind on this agreeable task would give a zest to life; she would feel that the world was not quite a barren wilderness to her, and that there was an end and aim in living.

Some such feeling as this stirred Adrienne as she bowed herself out of the Queen's presence, and hurried to where she had left Renaud and the boy. She found the man in the act of fondling the child, who was displaying affection for his supposed father, and was asking him many questions in his childish way.

'Monsieur Renaud, I have the Queen's commands to conduct you into her presence,' she said.

Renaud turned round quickly, and with a sudden start. His face was white with a nameless fear—fear of his own boldness, paradoxical though that may seem. A few hours ago he was little more than a waif: hungry, friendless, forlorn.

Now a strange chance had placed within his grasp the means to acquire fortune, even fame. The qualifications required to attain this end were unscrupulousness, a belief in himself, and a reckless daring. Did he possess these? Would the circumstances create the man, or would the man be able to adapt himself to the circumstances? To sustain the position he aimed at would require a mental capacity of no ordinary kind, and if he had not that capacity he would fall in his attempt to climb—fall and be crushed. But he had already calculated the chances for and against; and on the turn of the die he was prepared to risk all.

‘Mademoiselle,’ he said, almost breathless, ‘how can I appear before the Queen’s majesty in such raiment as this?’ and he pointed to his shabby and threadbare garments.

‘The Queen’s majesty is not interested in the man’s clothes, but the man himself,’ Adrienne replied with some emphasis. ‘Come, we must not dally. Royalty waits not, but must be waited on.’

‘And the boy, does he go, too?’ Renaud asked anxiously.

‘No. I will summon the old nurse, who will take charge of him.’

Renaud drew his breath in, much in the manner of a man about to take a header into the sea, and he thought to himself, ‘It is now or never to sit beside the stars.’

‘I am your humble servant, mademoiselle,’ he said, turning to Adrienne and bowing low. His heart was palpitating, but he was making desperate efforts to conceal his agitation; though at that moment there arose before his mental vision a phantom Court dazzling with the splendour of royalty, and filled with beauty and youth, and he, in picturesque grandeur, a conspicuous figure amongst them all. It was a wild dream, perhaps, but many a dream quite as wild had been fulfilled.

‘Come,’ said the lady; ‘let us go.’ She led the way past powdered lackeys and armed guards, and through what seemed interminable corridors, until the Queen’s reception-room was reached. Then she paused on the threshold, and, turning round to him, gave him some hints as to how he was to deport himself on coming into the presence of royalty. Two tall men-at-arms who stood on guard at the entrance of the chamber crossed their pikes and barred the way as they observed the dilapidated-looking stranger, notwithstanding that he was accompanied by Adrienne.

'Whence go you, sir?' asked one of the soldiers.

'To the Queen,' Adrienne replied, speaking for him, and with some indignation in her tone at what she considered officiousness.

'Hast thou warrant to enter?' asked the man, addressing himself still to Renaud, and ignoring Adrienne, though, perhaps, not with intentional rudeness.

Renaud felt extremely awkward. He was painfully conscious of his incongruous appearance when contrasted with all the gilt and evidences of greatness that were around him. These men looked spick and span in their polished accoutrements, their plumed helmets, and their long riding boots of fawn-coloured leather. At the doorway hung rich Genoa velvet curtains, the value of which would at that moment have seemed to him like an enormous fortune, while his lady escort wore apparel and jewels worth many thousands of francs. Yet he could scarcely rattle two sous together, and his whole worldly wealth might have been represented by francs counted on his fingers. The atmosphere, too heavy with the scent of perfume, and rich with the sense of gorgeousness and luxury, contrasted strangely with that to which he had been accustomed. *

From the gloom and care of grinding poverty he found himself suddenly, and as if by magic, in the full blaze and glitter of pomp and wealth, and it was impossible to help being dazzled and dazed. In the dilemma he was thus placed in by the opposition of the soldiers, he could only turn appealingly to his guide, and she, indignant and wounded in pride, said sternly:

'Stand apart, gentlemen. I am answerable for this man, and my presence is his warrant.'

'Nay, gracious lady, be not angry,' said one of the soldiers firmly but respectfully. 'We do but our duty, as you know, and without some other warrant we cannot allow so ill-conditioned and so suspicious-looking a person as this gentleman to enter into her Grace's private chamber.'

The man emphasized the word 'gentleman,' and turned up his nostrils with scorn.

Renaud's pride rose now, and his face burned with anger. Poor and shabby he knew he was, but he yet had the instincts of high breeding, for good, if not noble, blood ran in his veins. He possibly would have resented the soldier's

rudeness, had not Adrienne, stepping forward, said in commanding tones to the soldiers :

‘ Perhaps you only do your duty, but you do it insolently, sirs. An you think I have introduced a cut-throat to the palace, guard him jealously while I go to her Grace to procure her personal warrant for his admission. Stand aside, sirs, and let me pass.’

She waved her white arm disdainfully, and, turning to Renaud, said :

‘ Remain there, Monsieur Renaud, until I return.’

In obedience to her command, the soldiers grounded their pikes, and, making a salute, drew aside the massive velvet curtain, and she passed in. In that moment Renaud caught a glimpse of the brilliancy beyond ; but, like the Peri at the Gate of Eden, he must for the moment remain there disconsolate, his yearnings and ambitions, however, immensely intensified by the transient gleam that had been afforded him of the richness and seeming ease which lay beyond that velvet-screened portal.

CHAPTER V.

THE SHADOW OF THE DEVIL.

RENAUD had not to wait long before Adrienne de Bois returned. She bore the signet-ring of the Dauphiness, and holding it up before the men-at-arms, said :

‘ Behold the Queen’s warrant. Now, then, permit this gentleman to pass.’

The soldier who had been the spokesman looked at the ring, and then, with a salute, he once more drew aside the purple curtain. Adrienne made a sign to Renaud to follow her, and she passed through the doorway. With palpitating heart he stepped across the magic boundary, and found himself in the presence of the Queen and her husband and the brilliant throng of courtiers. His wandering eyes took in the generalities of the gorgeous surroundings rapidly, and then somehow—he knew not how, for it was like a bewildering dream to him—he found himself kneeling at the feet of the beautiful Mary, the Queen of Scots and Dauphiness of France. All interest was at once centred upon him, and his shabby appearance caused general astonishment, and some of the

powdered and perfumed ladies and gentlemen turned up their patrician noses, as this hungry-looking and ill-clothed man suddenly intruded himself in their sight, which was accustomed only to glitter and gaud. There was one, however, who viewed him with mingled astonishment and wrath.

That one was Basile the Jester. Assuming an air of railery, though he could not conceal his scorn, he cried out :

‘ Riddle me, riddle me, lords and ladies. What bird does that very worthy gentleman resemble ? ’—alluding, of course, to the kneeling Renaud.

‘ Well, fool, what is thy answer ? ’ said the Dauphiness.

‘ A hawk, an it please you, your Grace. ’

‘ Wherefore a hawk, sirrah ? ’

‘ Because, madame, he looks as though his sole diet had been sparrows, and that they had been scarce of late. ’

The lords and ladies would have laughed at this cutting satire, which had a double meaning, had it not been that they noticed a frown on the Queen’s face.

‘ Peace, varlet ! ’ she said. ‘ Thou lettest thy saucy tongue wag too freely. Thou knowest well that this gentleman is here at my bidding. ’

Basile made a profound bow as he answered :

‘ Ay, madame, but hawks and doves should not be in the same neighbourhood. ’

‘ Thy wit, fool, is ill-timed, ’ the Dauphiness remarked in a tone that warned Basile it were better for him to remain silent for a time. Then she addressed Renaud :

‘ We hear, sir, with deep sorrow, that a grave misfortune has befallen you. We had hoped that our marriage-day would not have been marked by any such deplorable incident ; but we must recognise Heaven’s will in this sad matter, and bow humbly to it. You are a leech—are we rightly informed ? ’

‘ In the old Latin, ’ said Basile bitterly, ‘ a leech is termed a *sanguisuga*—that is, blood-sucker. ’

‘ Out on thee, varlet ! ’ exclaimed the Queen. ‘ Thy poor jokes fit not the occasion. ’

‘ Heed not the prating knave, sir, ’ she said to Renaud, who, still kneeling and with bowed head, appeared to be utterly indifferent to the Jester’s remarks.

‘ Yes, your Grace, I have studied the business of medicine, and hold my letters to that effect, ’ said Renaud in a low voice, and speaking with difficulty owing to his great embarrassment.

'Have you pursued your calling of a physician?' asked the Dauphiness.

'I have endeavoured to do so, your Grace,' answered Renaud, growing a little more confident, and raising his eyes to her Grace's face.

'Endeavoured?' repeated the Queen. 'Wherefore *endeavoured*. That seems an indefinite term.'

'With your Grace's permission I would explain that I have lacked patronage, and wanting reputation, I have, alas! failed to obtain business.'

'Perhaps through fault of your own,' the Queen suggested.

'Nay, your Grace; as you will, permit me, I would say that such is not the case. Poor men may rise sometimes, but more often their very poverty keeps them down.'

'It may be so, it may be so,' the Queen observed thoughtfully. 'Well, sir, proceed,' she added; 'we are interested in you, and would know your history.'

'I have little history to relate, your Grace,' Renaud answered. 'I married young; but a shadow fell between me and my wife.'

'The shadow of the devil,' put in Basile, 'and some of its blackness must have stuck to the very worthy gentleman.'

Renaud raised his head and looked at the Jester. Their eyes met, and in that look the two men expressed what each felt: 'You and I are deadly enemies.'

The Queen took no notice of Basile's remark, but, referring to what Renaud had said, she exclaimed:

'That preludes a romance. Gather round, my lords and ladies, for now we shall have an interesting story.'

'Ay, by my faith,' cried Basile, shaking his bells; 'a story with embellishments, done in colours by the author.'

'Thou chattering pie!*' exclaimed the Queen, pretending to be severe; 'an thou usest thy libellous tongue to no better effect, we will have a padlock put upon it, and stop its freedom. We pray you proceed, Master Renaud. Tell us what was the shadow you speak of.'

'A suspicion—ill founded on my part—of my wife's fidelity.'

'Then did you do a grievous wickedness to your wife, good sir!' said the Queen.

'In very truth I did, your Majesty,' Renaud remarked in a penitent tone; 'and yet I thought I was justified.'

* Magpie.

‘Ay, by my dead father!’ exclaimed the Queen with warmth. ‘Men ever think they are justified in suspecting their wives, as if women were never aught but passion’s slaves.’

‘I would humbly crave your Grace’s pardon, if I have said that which has offended your Grace’s ear.’

‘Nay, go on—go on, good man,’ said the Queen a little haughtily. ‘An I understand you, your affairs prospered not?’

‘Even so, your Grace,’ answered Renaud, feeling a little uneasy lest he had made a bad impression. ‘Bad fortune pursued me, and custom came not. I fell into despondency, and my wife grew desperate. Yesterday, on the occasion of your Grace’s wedding, and all unknown to me, my poor wife endeavoured, possibly in a moment of mental aberration, to approach your Grace for some help. Last night, when she lay a-dying, she told me with her fleeting breath that she knew your Grace was as kind as beautiful; and that your Grace was full of great pity and sweet charity; and that on such a day, when your Grace’s cup of happiness was filled to the brim, you would not turn a suppliant away. The poor creature had writ your Grace a letter, in which she prayed you, in the name of the Holy Virgin, to help her and her husband—that is me—for our child’s sake. It was in trying to present this letter to your Majesty that my unfortunate wife met her death.’

The Queen appeared to be much touched, and for an instant she pressed her handkerchief to her eyes.

‘Have you that letter in your possession?’ she asked.

The question caused Renaud considerable embarrassment, which did not escape the keen observation of Basile, though he made no remark. Renaud was conscious that to lose his presence of mind at this critical stage would be fatal to his interest, and so he answered quickly and boldly:

‘No, your Majesty, I have it not.’

‘What has become of it, then?’

‘It was so stained with my wife’s blood, your Grace, having been in the bosom of her dress, that I destroyed it.’

‘Were you with your wife when she endeavoured to approach us?’

‘No, your Majesty.’

‘How learned you of the accident?’

‘A kindly neighbour, who was in the crowd, recognised my

wife, and brought me word. My unfortunate wife died in my arms, and dying told me all. News reached us that your sweet Grace had caused our boy to be conveyed to your Grace's palace, and with her last breath my wife prayed that her life might not have been sacrificed in vain, but that your Majesty would be moved to pity the child and its unhappy father.'

'Your story, sir, has deeply interested me,' the Queen remarked, betraying by her voice and manner that she really was affected; 'and I will consider in what way we can answer your dying wife's prayer. Mademoiselle Adrienne, thou hast the sweet child still in thy care?'

'I have, your Grace.'

'Continue to watch over him, then, until our further pleasure has been expressed. And you, Monsieur le Comte,' she said, turning to a gentleman at her elbow, 'will do us the favour of requesting the Chamberlain to see Monsieur Renaud well bestowed for the present. And,' she added, referring to the Jester Basile's remark, and speaking in pleasant irony, 'Monsieur le Comte will order the Chamberlain to be sure that there be no lack of sparrows, for even hawks may fatten.'

'Does your Grace forget that hawks are birds of prey?' Basile remarked.

'No; nor does her Grace forget that thou art in very truth a fool,' she replied sharply.

Renaud rose from the kneeling position which, in accordance with Adrienne's instructions, he had maintained during the interview, and, bowing profoundly to the Queen, backed out of the royal presence. His head was in a whirl, and he felt faint with suppressed excitement. Vistas of future greatness opened before his mental gaze; and with the prospect of success his ambition swelled. It was a dangerous ambition, because it was calculated to produce in him a thorough unscrupulousness.

'What,' he thought 'what is to hinder me from climbing to those giddy heights where sit those who are clothed in purple and fine linen? I am not ill-favoured in face and form. I have education, and though at present I lack the polish of the courtier, methinks I am not such a fool but what I can take it on. Hitherto I have been fettered to the kennel. I have burst the fetters now, and will soar upward. Ay, ay, Master Basile,' and a smile of self-satisfaction played about his mouth. 'Ay, ay! I will be a hawk indeed, as thou mayst find. I thank thee for having given me that phrase.'

In accordance with the instructions he had received from the Dauphiness, the Chamberlain lodged Renaud most comfortably. A chamber, luxury itself compared with what he had been used to, was allotted to him, and he soon found himself faring sumptuously. This tiny sip of Court life, so to speak, only served to whet his appetite, and he found himself craving for more. He wondered how and in what way her Majesty would provide for him, and he grew feverish with curiosity.

For three days he was left without sign or hint as to the course that was to be pursued. He became a little uneasy, fearing that probably some inquiries were being made about him. He questioned Adrienne, whom he had the opportunity of seeing frequently, but she could tell him nothing. He made a great display of affection for the child, who called him papa, and returned the affection with childish warmth. He was an exceedingly intelligent boy, with a soft, pliable nature and a sweet and loving disposition. Adrienne proved very faithful to her trust, and bestowed much care and attention upon the child. One day, in accordance with the royal commands, she took him to the Dauphiness. He had been provided with suitable clothes, and the Dauphiness was exceedingly struck with his remarkable beauty. She kept him with her for a full hour, fondling him and saying many pretty things; and when she was dismissing him, she remarked to Adrienne:

‘That is a dear sweet child, and of marvellous intelligence; we will keep him in our Court, and he shall be specially trained; for who can tell, perhaps some day he may be useful to us? But of this more anon.’

Adrienne went out of the royal presence filled with pleasurable emotion. She had developed a fondness for the boy that would have made separation from him now exceedingly painful. But the Queen’s words filled her with hope, and she thought, with all a woman’s pride: ‘I will mould this boy, and make a man of him after my own heart.’

On the morning following this interview, Renaud, in the belief that he was really the father of the child, received a visit from the Queen’s chief physician, who had been instructed to question him and ascertain the extent of his knowledge in medical science. Renaud had nothing to fear from this examination, for he understood his business perfectly. It did not take the physician long to discover this; and the

report he conveyed to the Dauphiness was very favourable. The result was that in a few hours afterwards Renaud was informed that he would receive an appointment as an assistant to the royal physicians; and as some solace for his wounded feelings, and the loss he had sustained by the death of his supposed wife, he was presented with a substantial sum of money in order that he might provide himself with such raiment and fittings as were in accord with his new position.

CHAPTER VI.

‘THOU ART BEAUTIFUL AS A ROSE; BUT, LIKE A PLUCKED ROSE,
THOU MUST WITHER.’

RENAUD’S scheme for self-aggrandisement was a bold and daring one; but a strange chance had placed certain information in his possession which made his course comparatively easy so long as he was willing to throw scruples and principles overboard. That he was so willing was apparent, and will become more apparent as this history proceeds. The qualm of conscience that had at first troubled him, when on the night of the royal marriage he had stood at the garret window and gazed over that wonderful scene of illuminated Paris, had speedily disappeared. The various qualities of his character, such as cunning, artfulness, tact, diplomacy—for these qualities had certainly been there in germ form—developed with marvellous rapidity in the Court atmosphere; and his subtle brain was soon busy weaving out plots and schemes for the future.

‘Men have before now risen from the gutter and stood on the very highest pinnacle of human greatness,’ he said to himself as a sort of text which he intended ever to keep present before his eyes.

The circumstances of his position threw him much with Adrienne de Bois. He was the supposed father of the boy François, and he had to keep up that character, while she had, for the time being, been appointed, by the Dauphiness herself, guardian of the boy, so that she and Renaud met daily. He very speedily came to know that she was a power in the Court, inasmuch as she had great influence with the Dauphiness. Now, the Dauphiness was wife to the heir to the throne of France, and some day would possibly share that throne;

white already she was the crowned Queen of Scotland, and at no distant date would personally rule over that country. If he would gain power, he thought, he must make a firm and devoted friend of Adrienne. Nay, he must go even farther than that, and win her heart. But whenever he thought that, and it was very often that he did so, a phantom voice seemed to whisper in his ear, 'Marie Jael.' The persistency with which the phantom voice repeated that name galled him, until the very name became hateful. His dark days of poverty, however, had taught him patience, and though he lost no possible chance of leaving, by various little artifices, an impression very favourable to himself on Adrienne's mind, he acted with all the caution of intrigue and diplomacy. By the end of a month the barriers of conventionality between him and Adrienne had been broken down, and he was enabled, without any breach of etiquette or want of courtesy, to treat her with the familiarity of a friend.

It happened one day, when he went to see François, that the child was sitting on Adrienne's knee, for she had been teaching him to read a missal. As Renaud bent down to kiss the boy's forehead, his hand by chance came in direct contact with Adrienne's hand, which was plump, soft, and white. For the first time he forgot the caution which had guided him hitherto, and he said in low tones :

'Mademoiselle, you have a soft, warm hand. And your heart is like it. By Heaven ! it were worth a man's while to perjure his very soul to win it.'

She looked at him, then dropped her eyes instantly, and the blood-red blush dyed her fair face to the very roots of her hair.

'Sir,' she said, 'you forget yourself.'

There was nothing severe in the way this was uttered. It was the tone of a coy, bashful woman, and he did not even affect an apology. At the same time, he had the discretion to go no further then.

Later on, in the solitude of his own chamber, as he stood admiring himself before a suspended mirror, he said, with a self-satisfied smile and a significant emphasis on his words :

'Adrienne de Bois can be taught to love me.'

No sooner had he said this than the smile faded out of his face, and in its stead came an expression that was half savage, half cynical, for that phantom voice whispered again in his ear :

‘ Marie Jael.’

Who was Marie Jael ? We will see.

About seven years before the events that have thus far been narrated, there lived, in a picturesque village on the banks of the Seine, and twenty miles or so from Paris, a young girl, then sixteen years of age. She was the only daughter of the Chevalier Jael, and was noted for her great beauty. The Chevalier’s career had been a wild romance. Born to high estate and great wealth, his future seemed destined to be brilliant and happy. He was a native of Flanders, and imbibed, in very infancy, the restlessness and warlike spirit which characterized his country at that time. While yet a youth he took up arms in the cause of Charles, the son of Philip the Handsome, and when that monarch ascended the Spanish throne Jael went with him to Spain. He subsequently took part in all the tremendous wars that were waged between Charles and Francis of France, and was severely wounded at the battle of Pavia. Twice he went with the Spanish King to Africa ; on the last occasion he made his way into Turkey, where he was taken prisoner. For years he languished in a loathsome dungeon, from which he was set free by a most beautiful Greek slave who had fallen in love with him. In his flight he took this girl with him, and subsequently married her. The result of that marriage was a daughter. Three or four years afterwards his wife died. All his estates had at this time been confiscated ; and so, ruined and broken in health, he retired into obscurity with his child. He went to Flanders first and afterwards to France, where he had some relations.

In the little village in which he took up his residence lived another family, poor but proud. These people were named Renaud, and they had a son called Philippe. For some reason or other the Chevalier detested the Renauds, and they returned his dislike with interest. This did not prevent Philippe and Marie from falling in love. Once her father discovered that Marie was holding communication with the son of his enemy. He flew into a towering passion, and vowed solemnly that before she should become Renaud’s wife he would kill her. This threat did not separate the lovers, but it made them more cautious.

Marie had an aunt who lived near Paris, and with whom she was a great favourite. She took this aunt into her confidence, and told her all. The aunt sympathized with her, and pro-

• mised to aid her. Philippe was sent by his parents to Paris to study, and Marie was in the habit of going once a fortnight to visit her aunt. Thus the lovers met and carried on their courtship. After two or three years of these clandestine meetings, Philippe, although he had no means and no prospects, save what the exercise of his calling might bring, persuaded Marie to secretly become his wife. She struggled against his persuasions for a long time, but at length yielded on condition that they remained apart until his affairs improved and he was able to make a home. She dreaded her father's wrath, for she was sure he would never forgive her. But, in spite of all, she was secretly married.

For a time Philippe Renaud displayed strong affection for his beautiful wife, while her love for him was an infatuation—a passion. The fortnightly meetings at the aunt's house were still kept up regularly; but Philippe's worldly affairs got worse instead of better. Poverty seemed to dog his very footsteps, and disappointment followed disappointment, until he grew cynical, became soured and fretful, and looked upon existence as only a burden of woes and cares. Both his parents were dead. He had been led to expect that this event would place him in possession of a small sum, that might prove a nucleus of something better. But it was found that his father's estate was so involved that there was insufficient for his debts, let alone for anything else. This was a sore blow, and it tended to make Renaud more reckless and more forgetful of his wife.

At last came the incident on the marriage-day of the Dauphin and Mary, Queen of Scots. That incident placed him in possession of certain facts which caused him to conceive a daring scheme, and to what extent he succeeded in carrying that scheme out we have already seen.

A month had now passed since he had met his wife, and she, getting anxious, had sent him letters. She was ignorant of his changed condition, and thinking that some new trouble had prevented his going to see her as usual, she prayed with all a loving woman's earnestness that he would not remain from her, or, she would get out of her mind.

This letter caused him great uneasiness, because it convinced him that he must reckon with his unfortunate wife before he could make his plans for the future. To him she had hitherto been all gentleness, all love, all consideration;

but he was perfectly well aware that she possessed a powerful will, and a good deal of the fire and resolution which had characterized the Chevalier during his remarkable career. Renaud saw, therefore, that diplomacy of a very subtle kind would have to be used in dealing with her; for even assuming that she was content to remain quiet under wrong and injustice, her father, should he learn of the marriage—as under such circumstances he would be almost sure to do—would move heaven and earth to utterly ruin and crush his unworthy son-in-law.

In the letter which Renaud had received from his wife, she named a night when she would be at her aunt's, and if he did not then go to see her, she would conclude that something serious was the matter, and would at all risks go to Paris to make inquiries about him.

This expressed determination on the part of his wife left Renaud no alternative but to go. He must disarm suspicion, if she had any, and keep her quiet for a time at least. He became very uneasy and restless as he saw how she must ever be a menace and a danger to him. Unless he could succeed in keeping her entirely in the dark as to the new career he had entered on, she would expose his baseness, by proving him not to have been the husband of the woman who had lost her life on the Queen's marriage-day, and, consequently, that François the boy could not be his son. He fairly shuddered as he contemplated the consequences of such an exposure. Not only would he be utterly ruined socially, but in all probability his life would be sacrificed to the Queen's anger.

A month of luxury—that is, luxury as compared to anything he had ever before been used to—had only served to arouse in him an unquenchable ambition to climb still further up the ladder, until he reached that firmament of greatness where burned earth's stars.

'I will shine amongst them,' he had said over and over again to himself; but in his reckoning he had not taken due account of her who was his lawful wife. But now her letter showed him that, though he was on the first rungs of the ladder, a millstone was round his neck, and unless he could detach it, it would drag him off and down to the nethermost regions.

That he was capable of deep scheming he had given ample evidence, but he racked his brain fruitlessly in his endeavour

to concoct a scheme that would effectively secure his present position, and render his wife powerless to harm him. That he must see her was certain, and so on the night appointed he went on foot to the little village where he was to meet her. Before leaving Paris he took the precaution to repair to his former squalid lodgings, where he changed his Court clothes for a suit of his former seedy attire. He had no difficulty in effecting this, as he had had the foresight to retain his lodgings, paying his rent regularly, and accounting for his absence by saying that he had obtained a temporary appointment. He therefore appeared before his wife without any outward sign of his better fortune, save it was in a more fleshy and robust appearance. Marie Jael—it was the custom in France for a married woman to retain her own surname—received her husband with every manifestation of delight and affection. He tried to reciprocate this, but the absence of sincerity in his manner struck her, for she exclaimed in surprise :

‘Thou art strangely cold, Philippe. What is the reason of this change?’

‘Nay, love, thou dost me a wrong. But I am troubled and anxious. Thou knowest well that fortune does not smile upon me, and my lot seems destined to be ever one of carking care and gnawing misery. Bear with me, sweet, for thy reproaches would make my already heavy burden unbearable.’

‘Ah, husband darling, doubt me not,’ she exclaimed, as she threw her arms round his neck. ‘Thy sorrows are my sorrows, thy burden my burden. But speak not so despondingly, my heart of hearts. The sun will shine upon thee some day, for thou art honest and of noble disposition, and fortune is only testing thy metal now. She will not always treat thee so scurvily.’ Renaud winced and felt uneasy, but he made no remark, and Marie continued : ‘Thou knowest, my beloved, that my dear father’s broken health makes it improbable that he can long survive. While he lives my duty is to him, but whenever the dread event of his death takes place, then thou shalt find me at thy side. The little fortune—the mere pittance, alas !—that I shall possess when my poor father has passed away may give thee a start, it may be. I will encourage thee to work and struggle—ay, and I will bring thee better luck, or I am not a Jael.’

As she spoke she looked lovingly and yearningly into his pale

face; but his eyes were averted, for he dare not meet her gaze. She was in truth beautiful, and the man who could have turned coldly from such a woman must have been strangely constituted. Under other circumstances Renaud would not and could not have done so, but now she was the barrier that barred his progress on to greatness. The thought of self was the one dominant thought in his mind, and all else must give way to it.

Marie Jael was not only beautiful, but picturesquely so. She was still girlish in appearance, and her mould inclined to that of the Greek type. There were the swelling outlines of form, and the wonderful grace of contour which is so characteristic of Greek statuary. A firm, compact head, around which was twisted a mass of black hair, was delicately poised on a supple neck with slightly arched throat. The face was lacking in none of the essentials which are indispensable to perfection in the type she represented. There were the exquisitely cut nostrils, quivering with nervous life, and the firm small lips closing over even, white teeth without a fault in their regularity. Her eyes, deep-set and dark as night, were liquid and dreamy in repose, but filled with flashing fire when their owner was moved by passion or emotion. In fact, no one could look into that face, with all its striking beauty, without feeling instinctively that the owner had a power of determination within her, and a spirit of self-reliance which, if provoked, might be capable of spurring her on to do great deeds. The more one looked at her the more one was impressed with the conviction that she could be a splendid friend or a terrible enemy.

'Ah, dear one,' her husband said, affecting distress of tone, 'thou art indeed a treasure and a noble wife, and the day that sets thee permanently by my side will be a joyous day to me. But until that day come I must struggle to break my own fetters. Nay, wife, I am so dispirited by the failures I have met with, and the poverty that has encompassed me, I vow by the saints that were it not for thy sweet sake I would make an ending of my sorrows by self-slaughter.'

'Husband, speak not thus,' his wife exclaimed chidingly, and drawing back from him slightly. 'Life hath its responsibilities, and thou must accept them with good grace, while Hope is a fair star that should ever guide brave men.'

'Thou teachest me my duty, dear one,' he said. 'Happily

there is already a rift in the dark clouds that have environed me, and a little light breaks through. But, heart of mine, a sore sadness weights me down, for I must for a time part from thee.'"

'Part from me!' she cried in alarm.

'Even so, dearest pet; but be not alarmed; our separation will endure not long.'

'And whither goest thou, my husband?' she asked sadly.

'I go to England, dearest one.'

'To England; and wherefore voyage you so far as that?'

'A certain gentleman of high degree, to whom I have been honourably represented, hath business in that country. It is some State affair of which I wot not. He travels with a retinue, and, being in indifferent health, takes with him his own physicians, for, he truly sayeth, they are barbarians in Elizabeth's country, and know nothing of the art of healing.'

'And goest thou as his physician?' Marie asked with some incredulosity in her manner and tone.

'As an humble assistant only, sweet wife. But who knows an I may not distinguish myself?'

'And when wilt thou set out upon thy journey?'

'I know not yet. The day is still unfixed; but mayhap it will be in about a month's time.'

'An it is for thy good, Philippe, I shall not stand in the way of thy going, though thy absence will fill me with sorrow and anxiousness. But thou wilt think of me, dearest.'

'By my faith, I will.'

'And thou wilt not let any other woman's image come between me and thee?'

'Wherefore art thou jealous?' he said with a laugh.

'Nay, husband, I have trust and faith in thee; but'—the hidden fire of her eyes revealed itself, and the soft expression of her face hardened into one of stern, passionate determination—'but, an it should be so, I would not kill myself, as some foolish women do, but I would slay her who had dared to rival me in my husband's love. Ah, dear one,' she said, changing her tone to pleading gentleness, 'forgive my passing, foolish fear. She who loves well is ever jealous.'

'Poor silly little maid!' he answered as he caressed her. 'Put thy shadowy fears away for ever. Here thy name is writ'—he placed his hand on his heart—'and no other can possibly efface it.'

‘Husband of mine, thou makest me joyful indeed,’ she exclaimed, as she let her head fall on to his shoulder. There was a pause; then she looked up into his face and asked: ‘Thou wilt see me again before going upon thy perilous journey?’

‘As surely as I hold thee now. We will meet again on this night fortnight an all be well.’

‘Heaven forfend that it be otherwise!’ she said reverently. Then she wound her beautiful arms round his neck and kissed him often.

Soon the limit of the time allowed for the interview was reached, and they had to bid each other good-night. She clung to him in fond embrace, then, extracting many promises from him, released him, and he went his way. And presently as his thoughts were busy with her, he murmured:

‘Thou art beautiful as a rose, Marie; but, like a plucked rose, thou must wither.’

CHAPTER VII.

‘WILD AMBITION, LIKE A RAVENOUS WOLF.’

AFTER that interview with his wife Renaud grew more and more troubled in his mind, and there were moments when he almost longed for a return to his dark days of poverty; for conscience then certainly did not vex him, and at night he could sleep the sound sleep of the just. Now, however, he must intrigue—and intrigue deeply, if he would gain the stakes for which he was striving.

His struggles with himself were those which every man has to endure when he first turns from the paths of honesty and rectitude and plunges into the by-ways of deception. Such a struggle was bound to end, as it invariably does when there is much to be gained in a worldly sense, in the fall of the better part of the man. Renaud had been but a few weeks at Court, but it was long enough to beget within him a craving thirst for power and wealth; and he knew perfectly well that if he would satisfy that craving he must smother down all scruples.

So far he had made excellent progress, and had proved that he possessed in an eminent degree the qualities of a courtier. He had learned to perfection, even in that short time, the art of dissembling; nor was he slow to perceive that the Court itself was a very hotbed of intrigue. There were parties and

aliques, each covertly working against the other, and he saw that if he would climb up to the heights he longed for, he must ally himself to one of those parties, taking care to select the most powerful one. Keeping these things steadily in view, he was careful to do everything he possibly could to cultivate and secure the friendship of Adrienne de Bois. The lady possessed great influence with the Dauphiness, and some such influence was indispensable to Renaud. Therefore, he cast his eyes upon Adrienne, and thought to himself: 'I must acquire power over this woman, in order that she may give me power. And in no way can a man obtain such a hold upon a woman as by teaching her to love him.'

Renaud was perfectly well aware, however, how dangerous it was for a man situated as he was then to give practical effect to this doctrine. Marie Jael threw her shadow across his path and warned him of the risk he ran. Gentle as a fawn under ordinary circumstances, she nevertheless possessed an extremely jealous disposition, and under the influence of her jealousy she was capable of developing a passion and fierceness that were little short of madness. She had forcibly expressed this when on the occasion of his last interview with her she had said, referring to the possibility of any other person supplanting her in his heart: 'I would not kill myself as some women do, but I would slay her who had dared to rival me in my husband's love.'

It was this spirit of fierce determination, which Renaud knew perfectly well his wife possessed, which troubled him, inasmuch as he could not shut his eyes to the fact that if Marie Jael obtained but the slightest inkling that he was deceiving her it would be farewell to all his ambitious schemes. Personally he had no fault to find with Marie. On the contrary, he loved her in a certain sense, and he knew that her rare beauty made her a treasure that many men would have perilled their lives for. But she was without influence, and the small fortune she was entitled to would never do more than allow him to live in a very humdrum sort of way. It is true that, had he been a plodding, persevering man, he might in time by his own exertions have largely supplemented her income, and so have enjoyed a fairly comfortable position; and he might have been satisfied to have striven for this, had it not been for the strange chance which placed him in possession of a secret that was a golden key to power and wealth. That secret had

created in him a burning thirst for power, and as it was impossible to raise his wife with him, he must let her drift away while he went forward on his perilous course.

But how was he to separate himself from her? That was not by any means an easy problem to solve. He was a physician, and acquainted with the subtle mysteries and life-destroying properties of certain drugs, but to have practically tested these on his unfortunate wife would have exposed him to the danger of detection. For she enjoyed excellent health, and her death, whether brought about suddenly or by lingering malady, would have been certain to have aroused suspicion on the part of her friends, to whom she was very dear. But quite apart from the risks to which it would have exposed him, Renaud was not yet so hardened that he could coolly and deliberately plan the destruction of her who had given him a woman's true love. Nay, the very thought of such a thing made him shudder, for, although he was willing to intrigue, and to stoop to any deceit in order to gain his ends, he drew the line at murder, and especially the murder of his beautiful girlish wife, for whom he still felt a yearning. Still, it was imperatively necessary that some steps should be taken, in order that he might be freed from anxiety, and his position be rendered secure. To gain this very desirable end only one way presented itself; that was the intervention of a third person.

Renaud was too clear-sighted not to see that even in this course considerable risk must be faced, because he was placing a weapon in the hands of another person who might at any moment turn it against him. Still, he was hopeful that he could guard against this, and devise some scheme whereby he could secure the fidelity of his factotum. Money, he knew, was a powerful agent in this respect, though at present he was not blessed with much of it; but he had discovered that his position as an officer in the household of the Dauphin was looked upon by certain Hebrew gentlemen as good security for loans advanced at usurer's interest. For then, as now, the typical Hebrew money-lender flourished and waxed fat on the covetousness and greed of his fellow-men. Renaud had already availed himself to a limited extent of this means of raising funds, and he was resolved now to resort to it in order that he might purchase the assistance of someone to do his bidding. In casting his eyes about for this 'someone,' they

alighted on his friend and whilom companion, Paul Reibell. Nothing could have been more natural than that he should, in his dilemma, turn his eyes to this man.

Paul Reibell was an adventurer pure and simple. His origin few besides himself knew. He had been everything in turn and nothing for long, and seemed to totally depend upon his wits for his means of living. He loved ease and hated work. Gifted with a handsome face, a splendid figure, an irresistible plausibility, a naturally polished manner, a fluency of speech, and a happy-go-lucky, devil-may-care disposition, he was at once seductive and dangerous. He lived in the 'to-day,' and snapped his fingers at the 'to-morrow.' To women he was ever gracious, but his power over them was as fatal as the power of the fabled basilisk. To men he was a jovial companion, courageous and reckless, but utterly unstable and incapable of devotion.

When the acquaintance between him and Renaud first began it is difficult to say, but they had known each other for years. Reibell was Renaud's senior by nearly ten years, and friendship existed between them so far as it could exist between two such men. It is probable, however, that the link that bound them was the knowledge possessed by Renaud of a certain incident in Reibell's life.

Some ten years previous, they, in company with other young sparks, had gone to a masked ball held at a tavern on the occasion of a fête. Full of wine and passion, Reibell had suddenly got into a dispute with another mask about a girl each in turn had danced with. From dispute they had got to high words, from high words to blows, and his antagonist called Reibell 'a gutter-dog.' Reibell instantly resented this by drawing his dagger and plunging it fiercely into his opponent's breast. The tragedy was enacted in the tavern garden, which was only faintly illuminated by small oil-lamps. Renaud was the sole eye-witness of the deed, and in the confusion and excitement that followed the finding of the body he and his companion fled without its being known who they were.

Subsequently it turned out that the slain youth was the only son of a wealthy bourgeois, who, broken-hearted at the death of his heir, offered a large reward for the discovery of the assassin. Renaud remained staunch, however, and as he was the only one who actually knew who had committed the deed, Reibell escaped detection, and since then had displayed a

certain dog-like fidelity to the man who if he had liked could have delivered him up to the vengeance of the law, although the law was lax in those days, and human life was held cheap, especially when it was sacrificed in a tavern brawl.* But if the law had failed to avenge the deed, it is certain that Reibell would have fallen beneath the vengeance of the dead youth's friends. For in such cases 'the wild justice of revenge' was invariably resorted to, thus Reibell really owed his life to his friend Renaud.

From this it will be understood that Renaud had good reason for thinking that he might safely make Reibell his emissary. Since he became attached to the Court he had not seen him, for Renaud had considered it wise and politic to drop all his old companions; but having determined to use Reibell, he took an early opportunity of hunting him up, with what result will be seen.

CHAPTER VIII.

'IT IS A WICKED WORLD, AND FEW OF US ARE SAINTS; BUT THERE'S PLEASURE TO BE HAD FOR THE BUYING.'

IN a frouzy street in the Latin Quarter of Paris, Paul Reibell had his lodgings. It was a narrow, dismal-looking street, with great, tall wooden houses on either side, and at the top of one of these houses, and right under the tiles, Reibell occupied a room. He was in the habit of jocosely remarking that the reason he lived so high was to be above his creditors, for few or none of them would venture to climb up the many flights of greasy wooden stairs, where, owing to the darkness and the grease of ages, a stranger was very apt to break his shins or his neck, even if he escaped assassination.

Renaud knew his way well, and so one morning soon after the clocks had announced the hour of eleven he rapped on Reibell's ramshackle door. He had chosen this particular time, because he was aware that it was the best for seeing his friend. Reibell was essentially a night-owl, and if he was acquainted with the proverb about the early bird and the worms, he had no faith in it. At any rate, he preferred the things of the night to the worms of the morning, and, like the owls, he generally went to roost when the dawn proclaimed itself in the east.

Getting no response to his knock, Renaud pushed the door,

and the rickety latch, which had been reduced to its last screw, was too weak to offer any resistance, and yielded easily. Reibell was snoring on his pallet. The room was musty and wretchedly furnished. The small window, being partly obscured by the overhanging eaves, scarcely admitted light enough to make everything in the room visible.

Renaud was well dressed, as he wished to make an impression on his friend. He wore lavender-coloured hose and puce trunks, with a doublet to match, and a broad lace collar relieved by a small bow of red silk ribbon. And being now 'a gentleman of the Court' he was armed with a rapier in a velvet scabbard. He had taken the precaution, however, to envelop himself in a large black cloak, in order to hide his fine clothes, for they were out of place in such a neighbourhood. But now he took his cloak off, seated himself by the bedside, in such a position that the light fell full upon him, and with a thread of fringe which he drew from the coverlet he tickled Reibell's nose.

It was some moments before the effects of the tickling communicated themselves to the sleeper's brain. Then he twitched his nose about, and made various grimaces, striking out at last with his hand, after the manner of a person who tries in a half-dreamy state to whisk a fly away. Renaud continued the tickling process, until, irritated into wakefulness, Reibell made a savage lunge at the supposed fly, hitting his nose a smart whack as he did so. Uttering an oath, and half starting up, he beheld Renaud sitting by the bedside roaring with laughter.

'Thunder and devils!' cried Reibell, rubbing his eyes in amazement. 'What does this mean? Am I dreaming? This is surely some trick of the brain, or you are the devil himself in the guise of Renaud.'

'No devil, good Reibell,' said Renaud, 'but truly thy old friend, and destined to prove a good angel to thee.'

'Then hast thou surely sold thyself to Belial and become one of his angels, for how else couldst thou be so richly dressed?' cried Reibell in surprise, as he sat bolt upright, and stared as if he believed himself the victim of some illusion.

'Thou art wrong, dear Reibell,' said the other merrily; 'but come, attire thyself. I have business with thee.'

'Let me look at thy feet!' exclaimed Reibell, as he sprang from the bed, 'for I verily believe thou art cloven-hoofed.'

Whence comest thou ; where hast thou been this many a day ; and what wouldst thou with me ? Nay, now that I look at thee, thou art truly Renaud. . Come, thy hand, old friend. By the rood ! but this is passing strange. An I am in my senses, thou smellest of perfume, and thy beard hath the fashionable trimming. And, gods and fishes ! thou hast even a rapier.'

'Cease thy silly chatter, man,' cried Renaud, as he slapped his friend on the back. 'Put on thy garments, and let's to business.'

'Nay, but tell me truly, Renaud, hast thou really made a compact with the Evil One ?' asked Reibell, as he drew on his hose.

'Tut, man ! talk not so lightly of so terrible a subject,' said Renaud, as he made the sign of the cross.

'But where hast thou been this many a week ?' asked Reibell, proceeding to dress himself.

'That shalt thou know anon. Fortune has smiled upon me at last ; but I want thy help in order that she may not desert me just as I am tasting of her sweets. Thou knowest well she is a fickle jade.'

'Saints and sinners ! but this is passing strange,' exclaimed Reibell, with mock solemnity, as he arranged his curly hair with a broken wooden comb. He was a well-built, handsome man, inclining to stoutness. He had twinkling, merry eyes, and a general expression of geniality ; and yet withal there was an indescribable something about his face which unmistakably indicated that the man might be dangerous.

Having finished his toilet, and notwithstanding that his clothes were very much the worse for wear, he looked singularly attractive.

'Come,' he said ; 'I have a hollowness within me that requires filling. We will adjourn to Mother Gineste's tavern, and thou shalt have the honour of paying for the best meal the good dame can provide ; for, an I am a judge, thy fine clothes indicate a well-lined purse ; and, by the Virgin ! I cannot rattle two sous together. Over the feast thou shalt recount thy marvellous adventures, and tell me what devil or angel has shown thee the way to wealth.'

'Thy hollowness shall not continue long,' Renaud answered ; 'but I prefer that we go not to Madame Gineste's tavern.'

Reibell gave vent to a whistle, and exclaimed ironically :

'Oh, oh ! so, so ! thy fine clothes and tavern benches would

not agree, eh? By St. Christopher! but it has not taken thee long to change thy tastes. Nay, and it may be that even I, thy former bosom friend, am too humble for your Grace.'

'Cease thy badinage, I pray thee, good Reibell,' said Renaud with ill-concealed irritability. 'A strange chance brought me under the notice of the Dauphiness, and I have received an appointment to the Court.'

Reibell, at this revelation, opened his eyes in blank amazement. Then he whistled again; then he backed towards the bare wall, made a most profound bow, and remarked:

'I knew thou hadst been in treaty with Beelzebub; and may I never more sup at Mother Gineste's tavern if there isn't a reek of sulphur about thee. Get thee gone, I pray thee, for I like not thy appearance.'

'An thou lovest me, make not an ass of thyself,' exclaimed Renaud sharply. 'My good fortune shall be thine also. I want thy services, and shall pay thee well. Come, sit down, and for once be serious, for in faith it is a serious business this of mine.'

'I like thee better now,' said Reibell with irony, 'and thy purse will like me, I'll warrant. Let us to this serious business, then. What wouldst thou?'

He drew up a stool and seated himself, and Renaud followed his example.

'Fortune lies in my way,' began Renaud; 'but between me and it is a barrier. That barrier is my wife.'

Reibell evinced new interest, and, fixing his eyes on his companion's face, said artfully:

'Ay, wives are inconvenient things at times, and thine will be specially inconvenient now that thou art a courtier.'

'Thou speakest truly,' answered Renaud boldly, for he knew that it was better to be very frank with his friend. 'My wife is inconvenient.'

'Well, seeing that thou hast knowledge of the mystery of drugs, why dost thou not——'

'Hush!' exclaimed Renaud with some show of alarm. 'Thou mistakest my purpose. I would not injure a hair of her head, as I hope for mercy.'

'Truly thou art a great man,' said Reibell with cutting sarcasm.

'No, but I do not wish to place my neck in peril just as fortune's sun is beginning to dawn upon me.'

‘Thou art a diplomatist also,’ remarked Reibell.

‘I am cautious, whatever else I may be,’ Renaud said with some warmth. ‘But now to the point. My wife knows not of my change, and I have informed her that I go to England. Thou shalt help me to keep up the deception. Thou shalt take letters to her as coming from me, and later on thou shalt inform her that I have died of a grievous malady caught in the gruesome swamps of foggy England. Dost thou understand my drift?’

‘The devil bite me if I don’t,’ answered Reibell, with a knowing wink. Then he added with a provoking drawl: ‘There is another woman at the bottom of this, or I am a fool.’

‘There is—a woman that will probably bring me fame and fortune.’

‘I smell the sulphur again,’ said Reibell with a mocking laugh.

‘Thy levity is ill-timed,’ Renaud answered, displaying some anxiety lest he had made a mistake in his man, and had prematurely revealed his plan. ‘I pray thee try for once in thy life to be serious.’

‘Nay, good friend, chide me not,’ exclaimed Reibell, attempting to look very earnest; and then as he laid his hand upon his heart, he said: ‘Thou knowest I am thine to command; my heart is true as steel, and thou wilt find me faithful as the pole star.’

‘I like thee better for saying that,’ Renaud remarked; ‘and thou wilt become my lieutenant?’

‘Ay, or may Satan fly off with me.’

‘Good. I will furnish thee with all informations from time to time, and shouldst thou manage this business cleverly, thou mayst count on being richly rewarded. Thou wilt see what it is I aim at. Marie Jael, my wife, is young and handsome. She has few friends. Her father is old and tottering into his grave. At his death she will inherit a small fortune. Believing me dead, and finding herself lonely in the world, she might not be reluctant to take unto herself another partner. That act would set me free. Thou hast followed me?’

‘Ay, clearly,’ Reibell answered thoughtfully. Then, breaking into his habitual laugh, he said: ‘By the Mass, thou art a wily diplomatist, and a great future lies before thee. I may

'I've to hear some day that thou hast become a great power at Court.'

'Some day it may be so,' Renaud replied significantly. 'But come, that hollowness of which you spoke anon is not yet filled. Get thee to the tavern, and tell Mother Gineste to give thee a flagon of her primest vintage. Here is the where-withal to pay for it.'

He drew out a long silken purse, and counted therefrom five gold coins, which he placed on the table. Reibell took them up, jingled them together in his hand, and, trolling a snatch of a bacchanalian ditty, said cheerily :

'Fortune, thou fickle goddess, I kiss thy feet. I will dine and sup to-day as I have not dined and supped for many a day, and Adeline, the pretty serving wench at Mother Gineste's tavern, shall have a ribbon for a love-knot. Thy hand, old friend,' he exclaimed, springing up. 'Come often, bring gold, and I will love thee.'

Renaud drew his cloak about him and pressed his hat down over his forehead. He took his friend's hand, and turned to go, but on reaching the door paused and looked back : and said, speaking with emphasis and great point :

'Reibell, thou hast a shapely neck. An thou hast respect for it, be *faithful* to me ; for thou mayst remember that I can put a rope round it. Adieu.'

He shut the door and commenced to descend the stairs, and so he saw not the sinister expression his unfortunate remark brought into the face of his friend.

'Oh, oh, Master Renaud !' muttered Reibell ; 'I like not thy threats. Thou wouldst make me thy bond-slave ; and while thou wouldst cheat the world into a belief in thine own immaculateness, thou wouldst brand me as a hangman's dog. Eh? Well, well, thy purse will have to be long to supply my wants, and thy heart will have to be fashioned of steel to escape my dagger, an thou shouldst prove *false* to me. Tral la la la la-la. Heigho! It's a wicked world, and few of us are saints; but there's pleasure to be got for the buying.'

With this philosophical reflection he clinked his gold pieces together, and then, having finished his toilet, he went forth to breakfast at Mother Gineste's tavern.

CHAPTER IX.

‘MY OLD LIFE GOES AWAY WITH THIS NIGHT, AND I WILL BEGIN NOW TO LIVE ANEW.’

IN accordance with the promise he had made, Renaud once more visited his wife at her aunt's house. He found her depressed in spirits and very sorrowful; for she stated that her father—the Chevalier—was in such a feeble state that it was manifest he was breaking up. This prospect, in addition to that of a long separation from her husband, caused Marie Jael to be very downcast. But the very melancholy which had spread itself over her face rather served to enhance her beauty; and as Renaud gazed upon her his conscience smote him for the deceptive part he was playing. He was tempted, strongly tempted, to abandon the path on which he had entered, brilliant and alluring though it was, and, clinging to his young and beautiful wife, fight his way honestly and fairly into a better position.

The struggle within himself was fierce, and Marie's soft hand and warm kisses almost made him vow solemnly that he would be true to her. But to his mental vision arose a picture of the Court with all its glitter, pomp, and show, and he saw himself a central figure in it, and homage being paid to him, while wealth, position, influence, power, were his. And in the picture Adrienne de Bois stood prominently forth, seeming to beckon him, and say, ‘Come; wherefore art thou afraid?’

Turning from this picture, his eyes dazzled by the glare, everything else seemed gloomy by contrast. If he remained with his wife there would be no greatness, no riches or pomp, no homage or power, only a humdrum, vulgar sort of existence that would be wearying by its very monotony.

He forgot, however, that by far the larger part of mankind have to lead monotonous lives; that one day is very much like another day; that week in and week out, month after month until the months stretch into years, the routine is the same, with little change, little break; and so life flits away until swallowed up in the impenetrable shadows of the grave. But, then, what pleasure may be derived from this existence, where it is made bright and sunny by genuine affection, and where a stout heart full of honesty of purpose,

and pulsing with healthy instincts, recognises that life is a duty, and that duty should ever be faithfully and cheerfully performed! Although he did not moralize quite like this, he nevertheless knew perfectly well that he had to choose between a right and a wrong way, and that, if he decided the latter, he must cast out of his nature every atom of honour, and steel his heart against her who loved him passionately, and whose love he had at one time as passionately returned.

With a man in whom the better instincts were yet active, the choice was sure to produce a conflict with himself, and to make decision a process of mental torture. One moment Renaud gazed on his young wife, and was prompted to take her to his breast, and, confessing all, crave her forgiveness, and register a solemn vow never to swerve from his fidelity to her again so long as he lived. But the next moment a siren-like voice seemed to whisper to him, and say, 'Adrienne de Bois—fame, power, wealth, greatness.'

Severely, painfully was he tried, and he proved too weak to resist the voice, and so after much wavering he mentally exclaimed: 'I am allowing sentiment to make a fool of me. He who would climb to greatness must have no sentiment.'

This thought seemed to quite determine him in the course he should pursue. The struggle had ended, and he had, to speak in a somewhat paradoxical way, conquered himself.

Marie had not failed to notice that he was troubled, and, attributing it to other causes than the true one, she wound her arms lovingly about his neck, and said sweetly:

'Ah, husband, thy dear heart grows heavy at the thought of parting, and I sicken and am faint with nameless fears.'

'Fears of what?' he exclaimed quickly, and almost yielding to an impulse to cast her from him, lest her warm and loving embrace should turn him from his purpose.

'Nay, I know not, dear,' she said sadly; 'but it seems hard that thou shouldst be forced to go from me when I am so lonely, and when my father's death will leave me lonelier still. Are there not yet some means by which this cruel separation may be avoided?'

'None!' he said with irritation in his tone, though why he should have been irritated is difficult to determine, save it arose by reason of disgust for himself.

'Thou speakest sharply,' she said, noticing his manner, and slightly recoiling from him.

'I am troubled sorely,' he responded, 'and could curse the fate that takes me from thee.'

'Ah, now art thou mine own true love again,' she cried joyfully, as she once more nestled to him. 'Thou art vexed, and thy true spirit chafes at having to leave thy wife behind. Is it not so, mine own dear love?'

'Ay, in faith it is,' he answered, still displaying irritation, and wishing to himself that he could get away from her without further words, for he was conscious that he was still weak, and that her winsomeness might insidiously find its way to his heart, which he was trying to harden into flint. He was, in point of fact, afraid that if he continued longer in her presence he could not resist her. And well might he think this, for she seemed on this particular night to have become more beautiful than ever—for the sorrow she was feeling gave a pensiveness to her finely-chiselled face, which suggested now one of the fanciful portraits that the great painters loved to depict, and in which chastened beauty and divine patience were the chief points aimed at.

'Noble husband!' she said proudly, 'for thy sake I feel I could dare everything. An thy journey cannot be postponed, I will, an thou shouldst so wish, set even my father, the Chevalier, at defiance, and go forth with thee to share thy fortunes, whether they be good or evil. Thy sorrows shall be my sorrows, thy joys my joys; and if Heaven should so will it that thou shouldst die, then will I die with thee.'

These words, by which she was proving the great strength of her love, only served to ruffle him still more, because the wishes and sentiment they expressed were not in accord with his. So he made answer quickly:

'Nay, Marie, that cannot be, for any such rashness on thy part would cause thy father to leave thee utterly penniless.'

She let go her hold of him, and as her eyes filled with tears she said reproachfully:

'Can this be true? It is not on me thy thoughts dwell, but on my fortune.'

He saw that he had committed an error, and hastened to make what reparation he could. He caught her in his arms, and affected great warmth of affection, and said, with apparent earnestness:

'Sweet Marie, wife of my heart, wherefore dost thou chide me so unjustly? What care I for thy fortune? Thou art

fully aware that we have jointly looked forward to thy small fortune, as the means to set us on the road to something better. Wherefore, then, should we sacrifice that? We must endure a little pain now, in order that we may enjoy much pleasure hereafter; and though my heart is torn at the thought of going from thee, and my feelings are rudely wrenched at the prospect of parting, yet am I willing to endure in silence and in patience, because I deem it to our mutual advantage.'

She seemed much impressed by his words, and she replied penitently:

'Thou art right, dear husband. Go, for thy sake and mine. I am a weak woman, but I will be strong in my weakness, and shed no tear nor utter sigh that would make thy step falter and cause thy purpose to waver.'

'Now art thou my brave and loyal wife,' he cried, as he kissed her forehead. 'Let us wince not at the wounds that parting makes, but turn our eyes longingly and joyfully to that near future which shall once more place us in each other's arms.'

'And when set you forth, dear husband?' she asked, suppressing a sigh and anxious to give a turn to the conversation.

'Within the week, love-bird,' he answered.

'So soon?'

'Ay, so soon; 'tis fate.'

'And fate is very cruel,' she murmured.

'Even so. But now let us discuss our plans. In order that thou mayst lack no news of me, I have made arrangements with my dear friend, Paul Reibell, to bring thee letters whenever I can send them to him. Thou must arrange for regular meetings with him, so that thy father's suspicions may not be aroused.'

'And who is Paul Reibell?' she asked in some surprise.

'By my faith, I had forgotten that as yet thou dost not know him. He is a very honest gentleman, of noble and honourable family. I have known him this many a year. Nay, he is even as a brother to me, and I hold no secrets from him. Therefore thou mayst trust him fully.' He paused for a moment, then added in a jocular tone: 'He is handsome withal, and full of attraction; therefore see to it, good wife, that thou keepest thy allegiance to me.'

'Thy friend will be welcome for thy sake, husband,' she said

with dignity; 'but an he were to utter one word that an honest wife might not listen to, then would he become thy deadly enemy and mine, and thou wouldst be justified of God and man in killing him for a traitor.'

'Bravely spoken, little woman!' Renaud exclaimed, as a pang of remorse shot through him, 'but thy fear is needless. My friend is staunch and true as steel, and would lay down his life to serve thee and me. Nay, an it should be Heaven's good will that my life should end ere I return to thee, my dying hours would be cheered by the knowledge that Paul Reibell would take my place in thy heart, and shield thee with a husband's strength and love.'

Marie shuddered a little, as though the very idea of Renaud dying horrified her; but she merely remarked:

'Thy end is far off yet—at least, we'll hope so. But even an it should be near, thy successor to my affections is not born.'

This answer did not quite please Renaud, but he took good care to conceal the true state of his feelings, and smilingly he said:

'Truly Heaven gave me a treasure when it gave me thee. Loyal, brave, and noble thou art—an honour to thy sex, a prize to me. We must live for each other, and all will be well.'

In speaking thus he really felt some of the sentiment he was expressing, and he was exhibiting evidence to himself that he was yet infirm of purpose. Had he not been so far committed to the course on which he had entered, he might have found it difficult indeed to tear himself away from this woman, whom he described truly when he said, 'Thou art an honour to thy sex, a prize to me.'

She was in very deed a prize, and he knew it. But he was willing to abandon her for what he believed to be a greater prize, though he did not pause to think that he might be giving up the substance for the shadow—parting with the fair fruit in order to partake of ashes.

The interview was becoming embarrassing to him, and he was anxious to end it. While in Marie's company he felt that her influence was liable to upset him, and he could not trust himself, since he was afraid that some sudden impulse of virtue might prompt him to fall at her feet and confess all. He was glad, therefore, to note that the time usually devoted to these meetings had just expired, and so, folding his arms about her, he said:

‘Beloved, I must leave thee now.’ For a time, at least, we must say farewell.’

She clung to him with some instinct of fear, and though she wished to be self-possessed and strong, tears welled to her eyes, and her voice was unsteady as she made response :

‘Is it really so? Has the moment really come for us to utter that heavy and heartrending word—Farewell? The air grows thick, and I am faint. But, there, dear one, go. It is my duty to place no impediment in thy way. Not even a loving woman’s tears must be allowed to have any effect upon thee. Farewell, my husband. Long indeed and weary will be the days until news comes from thee, to assure me that thou art well and happy.’ She paused, and then added, with pathetic tenderness : ‘An thou canst be happy away from her who has made thee her idol.’

To this womanly expression of sincerity and love he could only falter something that was meaningless. He was confused and bewildered. But she, attributing this to distress at leaving her, poured a wealth of loving words into his ear, and pressed sweet kisses on his lips. But the final moment came at last, and, tearing himself from her, he rushed out into the darkness of the night, and down the long garden that environed the house. Then, panting and distressed, he threw himself on the grass and gazed up to the silent white stars, until to his fevered fancy they seemed, in their very silence and their splendour, to reproach him, so that he turned from them and hid his face in the grass.

Once more he struggled with himself. It was a bitter struggle; but presently he sprang up savagely. He seemed to shake himself like an angry dog. His face was pale, his lips were compressed, his eyes were flashing.

‘I am an idiot!’ he muttered between clenched teeth. ‘A golden prize is actually within my grasp, and yet I hesitate to close my hands upon it. Tut! my weakness has passed. My old life goes away with this night, and I will begin now to live.’

He turned towards the house he had just left. Not a light was to be seen in it. It was a black mass, with its outlines only faintly defined by the stars. Over all reigned a silence that was like the silence of death. Renaud stood for a few moments. Then he uttered the word ‘Farewell,’ and, turning hastily, strode away, believing that he had looked upon his wife for the last time.

CHAPTER X.

‘I GIVE THEE BACK THY WORDS—SPAWN OF A TOAD.

FOR a few days after that parting from his wife, Renaud could not shake off a feeling of uneasiness and depression. Her presence seemed somehow to haunt him, and he half expected to be informed by some of the messengers that she had arrived at the palace. The uneasiness, however, gradually wore off, and when he found himself at Fontainebleau, whither the Court had removed for a time, he became quite cheerful and elated. ‘All my trouble now lies behind me,’ he thought, ‘while before me is luxury and ease.’

If Renaud could only have thoroughly dis severed the past from himself, his dream of luxury and ease might probably have been realized. But it is given to no man to do this. The past ever leaves its impress upon us, and nothing, save the effacement of memory, can obliterate that impress.

Renaud neglected no opportunity of strengthening his position at the Court, and he daily gave evidence that he had all the natural aptitude for, and the instincts of, a courtier. And what was of great consequence to him was, he succeeded in ingratiating himself in the favour of the young Dauphiness. It happened one day that a beautiful spaniel on which she set great store and value was kicked by a horse and had its leg broken. Renaud met one of the royal servants carrying the animal immediately after the accident. Learning that it was the Queen’s pet dog, he saw immediately how he might turn the incident to account, and he proceeded to bind up the broken leg, and to treat the animal generally, with the result that in a few weeks the dog was quite well again, much to the Queen’s delight and to Renaud’s advancement in her favour, for she not only commanded that a substantial mark of her gratitude should be given in the shape of a money payment, but she personally thanked him.

His position after this was materially improved, and he began to realize with intense gratification that he was very far indeed from being a nonentity at the Court. But there was one person, however, who not only tacitly refused to recognise his position, but did not hesitate to express his contempt for him in every possible way. This person was no other than

Basile the Jester. Renaud was intensely annoyed at this, but he had his own reasons for meekly submitting to it, though one day his discretion was forgotten, and open hostility nearly resulted. It happened thus. Renaud was rapidly turning an angle in one of the corridors as he was on his way to his room in the palace, when Basile was coming from the opposite direction. The consequence was that the two men came into forcible collision with each other.

'Thou gutter dog, thou spawn of a toad!' Renaud cried passionately, as he struck the luckless Jester a blow in the chest which sent him reeling against the wall. In an instant he perceived his error, and said quickly, 'Nay, good Basile, pardon my hastiness; but, by the Mass, thou hast well-nigh broken in my ribs. Come, thy hand. I regret me the blow I have given thee, and the words my idle tongue has uttered.'

Basile drew himself up with a look of withering scorn on his pale face. He was trembling with passion, and his eyes were flashing fire. He tossed back his head indignantly, making his bells jingle, and as he stood erect, his clenched fists pressed hard down to his sides, he said:

'I give thee back thy words—spawn of a toad. Thy hand I would scorn to touch, and the blow thou hast given me shall some day be revenged.'

He passed on without another word, and left his antagonist standing there, dumb with amazement and burning with anger at his own folly.

'Fool that I am!' he muttered. 'This man will be a bad enemy in my path, and I must see if he cannot be rendered more respectful or removed.'

Renaud tried to think lightly of Basile's threat, but his efforts were far from successful. The Jester was now his deadly enemy, he could not shut his eyes to the fact, and he thought to himself:

'I must watch and wait. Perhaps my chance will come to render the man harmless.'

Months passed away, and though Renaud and Basile often met, no word was ever exchanged; but on the Jester's part were scowls and frowns, and on Renaud's an assumed lofty indifference.

During those months Renaud had not been idle or indifferent to his interests, and had managed by his skill and

manner to draw considerable attention to himself. Through the instrumentality of his friend Reibell, whom Renaud had found a very costly aid, he communicated with his wife occasionally, and received through the same means letters from her. Her letters were always full of love, and expressed yearning for his return. Reibell on his part found his mission very agreeable, and particularly to his tastes. He valued his services pretty highly, and took good care to exact prompt payment from his good friend Renaud.

Marie, believing him to be a true friend, became much attached to him. He was an agreeable companion, and played his cards so skilfully to win her favour that she reposed perfect faith in him, and never dreamed that a wolf might be concealed in the lamb's skin. But quite apart from the monetary considerations, Reibell very soon came to look upon Marie with a lover's eyes. Her beauty fired his blood, and he longed to possess her, though he was too crafty to do anything rashly or prematurely.

At length the time came for the culmination of the plot between the two men, and Reibell, in accordance with the prearrangement, sought an interview with Marie Jael. Then with great tact, and discretion worthy of a better cause, he conveyed to the poor girl the information that her husband had died in England, after a brief and painful illness.

Never dreaming for a moment that she was being cruelly deceived, Marie was terribly shocked at the news, and gave way to hysterical weeping. But with wiles and arts, in which he was a past master, Reibell gradually reduced her to a serener frame of mind, and by insidious artfulness so traded upon her feelings that, under cover of profound friendship, he attempted to console her with caresses. And later on when he parted from her he was so exceedingly pleased with himself, that, reflecting on his position, he thought: 'Marie is mine'; and patting his own breast with admiration, he exclaimed: 'Good Reibell, thou hast done well, and there are fat times in store for thee.'

He evidently believed and felt that he was in luck's way, as the saying is, and that henceforth he had nothing to do but enjoy himself. His was certainly a happy disposition, whatever else might be said of it. Whether he had his pocket full of gold or was compelled to sup on a dry crust, he was equally light-hearted. Of course he preferred the gold, but

he liked to get it easily, for he loved ease, and ease to him meant laziness. He had a habit of saying that he and hard work could never agree, and so he took good care to have nothing whatever to do with it, as being the best means of avoiding a quarrel.

When Renaud heard the progress that had been made, and that his wife was now under the impression that she was a widow, he rejoiced exceedingly; and said to himself: 'The main obstacle to my advancement is rendered harmless. Marie, believing herself a widow, will not trouble herself any further about me. Her beauty will soon attract admirers, and she will marry again. Then all will be well.'

This reflection having made him bolder, and even more ambitious, he very soon began to pay more decided attention to Adrienne de Bois. She had been charged by the Dauphiness to show every care and attention to the little François, the supposed son of Renaud, and as a natural consequence she spent much time with the child, and became greatly attached to him.

Renaud had thus an opportunity of seeing Adrienne daily, and of frequently being alone with her, for on the plea of visiting his son he was often in her apartments. On three or four occasions, when leaving Adrienne's room, he was surprised to meet Basile the Jester. At first he attached no importance to it. Then it struck him that the Jester was playing the part of a spy on his movements, and this caused him to lose his temper again, so that one day he very foolishly accused Basile of spying, and said:

'Have a care, fool, lest, believing thee to be a menace to my safety as a viper would be in my path, I crush thee even as I would crush the viper.'

Basile laughed scornfully at this threat, and retorted:

'False knave, I fear thee not, and thy threats I despise.' So saying, he turned on his heel and walked away, leaving Renaud quivering with rage, but, as he himself knew, he was impotent to do anything.

This little incident disturbed Renaud for some days, but very soon his habitual confidence returned, and he began to make love to Adrienne with increased ardour. About three months later he openly declared his passion, and asked her to be his wife.

She acknowledged that he had entirely won her heart, and

that she loved him deeply, but she said that his request took her by surprise, and that, while not disinclined to accede to it, she would first of all have to ask the permission of the Dauphiness: that was 'a matter that required consideration; moreover, she must wait for a fitting occasion.

Renaud knew it was policy not to oppose this. In fact, he had no desire whatever to do so. He was satisfied with the progress he had made, and was content to wait. The 'fitting occasion,' however, seemed in danger of being put off indefinitely, for the Court was suddenly plunged into grief and mourning by the sudden and unexpected death of the husband of Mary, Queen of Scots. Mary thus found herself a widow before she was nineteen, and for a time was inconsolable, shutting herself up in her room and refusing to see anyone, excepting a few of her maids, amongst whom was Adrienne de Bois.

Some months later Mary prepared to leave the country of her adoption, in order to assume her position as Queen of Scotland. Amongst those who were to form her retinue were Adrienne and Renaud. He heard the order with unbounded delight, for in a foreign country what might he not accomplish? All things seemed possible now.

A week or two before the time fixed for departure, he met Adrienne de Bois on a terrace that overlooked the magnificent gardens of the palace. It was a July night, sultry and dreamy. The air was rich with the perfume of many flowers, and the stars were dream-like with hazy splendour. She, wrapped in a reverie, leaned against the railings, listening to the soft notes of a nightingale that piped in a neighbouring bower. Renaud knew that she often went there, and he followed her on this particular night. As he passed through the richly furnished chamber that led to the terrace, he was startled by what in the dim light he believed to be the figure of a man, who was apparently watching Adrienne. As Renaud approached, the figure turned and seemed to glare at him, then, silently and suddenly, as if it had been a spectre, disappeared behind a massive velvet curtain. For two or three minutes Renaud stood in alarm and doubt, until, with a sense of desperation, he approached the curtain and examined it, but there was no trace of human being.

He was a superstitious man, and a deadly fear seized him, for he thought he had seen a spirit. But shaking off his fear,

he suddenly hurried forward, caught the surprised Adrienne in his arms, and very soon was pouring a flood of passionate love words into her not unwilling ears.

'Adrienne, my beloved, thou wilt be my wife,' he cried, as he held her and kissed her again and again. 'Before we leave our native France let us be secretly united, and when our gracious Queen is less distracted by the cares of State, we will appeal to her to ratify our union. Say that it shall be so. Leave me no longer in suspense, for I feel that I do not live while thou art not mine. Make me the happiest man in Christendom to-night, by saying that it shall be as I desire.'

She was moved by the passion of his appeal, the fervour of his embrace, and her heart beat wildly with the ecstasy of love.

'I will give thee my answer to-morrow,' she murmured. 'And now go; leave me, for thou wouldst compromise my honour if we were discovered here.'

He pressed burning kisses on her upturned face, and then, in obedience to her command, hurried away, and as he entered the room he could have sworn that the figure of a man once more was there, and suddenly disappeared again behind the curtain. Renaud, however, began to think now that this was only some trick of fancy; at any rate, being elated and light-hearted, he was inclined to pooh-pooh his fears, and not for a single instant did he doubt that on the morrow Adrienne's answer would be favourable. On the following day he did not see her until late. When they met she was pale, agitated, and apparently ill.

'Thy answer,' he cried excitedly—'it is that for which my heart yearns, is it not?'

'No,' she answered in evident distress.

'No,' he echoed. 'Wherefore no?'

'I will give thee no reason, but I cannot be thy wife.'

He reeled a little. It was a shattering of his hopes, and seemed to knell his downfall. She noticed his distress, and, laying her hand on his, said kindly:

'It breaks my heart to say no, but, an thou lovest me, thou must respect my wishes. I will be thy true friend and supporter, but thy wife I can never be. Go, I beseech thee; nay, command thee.'

He would have prolonged the interview, but there was something in her tone and manner which caused him to think

that he would only damage his cause by remaining ; and so he kissed her hand and withdrew, and when he had gone Adrienne burst into tears.

The reason that her answer had been contrary to his wishes was this : On the preceding night, when she went to her sleeping chamber, she was startled to find a small ivory-handled dagger sticking in her dressing-table where she could not fail to see it, and attached to the handle of the dagger by a piece of ribbon was a slip of parchment, on which was written : ‘ Adrienne de Bois, beware of Renaud. Become not his wife, or an you do, that day you shall die as surely as you are a woman..’

CHAPTER XI.

‘ I HAVE PURSUED A SHADOW.

THE scene shifts, and we are in Edinburgh. The time is about the end of 1565.

Mary, Queen of Scots, at the head of a feudal army of ten thousand men, is sweeping through Fife to chastise her brother, the Earl of Murray, who, secretly supported by Elizabeth of England, has defied the power of his sister and lawful sovereign. Mary literally leads her army. She rides a powerful horse, and carries pistols, and by her courage and determination inspires her followers to daring deeds. She fined St. Andrews and Dundee large sums for having given aid to the insurgents ; and then she hurried with her victorious troops to the Ochil Mountains, where she stormed the powerful and romantically situated Castle Campbell, which fell into her possession after a feeble resistance.

This vigorous policy and personal daring rallied a large number of waverers to her standard, and had she continued to rule with the same firm hand, how different might her career have been !

Since her return to her native land her life had been full of excitement and incident, and she had been made the victim of the shameful intrigues of Queen Elizabeth and her Court. But the Scottish Queen was young and full of spirit, and after refusing various suitors for her hand she had become the wife of Lord Darnley, son of the Earl of Lennox, himself a member of the House of Stuart, though he had been banished from

Scotland for having espoused the cause of Henry VIII. He had, however, been recalled by Mary and restored to honour and position.

The Earl of Murray had been opposed to this marriage, and when he found that he could not prevent it, he broke into open hostility against his sovereign. One of the chief, if not the only cause of Mary's troubles, was the religious dissensions which had split up her followers into two parties. The intolerant John Knox was hurling his thunderbolts against the Romish Church; while the Catholics had leagued themselves together to resist persecution and to uphold their creed.

In the Palace of Holyrood Renaud was now a person of importance and influence. By intrigue, if not by crime, he had raised himself to a high position, and he made his power felt in a way that was little short of tyrannical. It will readily be understood, therefore, that he was hated and feared. Between him and his supposed son, François, there was no love. François had grown into a handsome, stalwart youth. He was a stanch Catholic, and a great favourite with the Queen, who had displayed much personal interest in his welfare, and had made him one of her pages.* To Adrienne de Bois, who had been a mother to him, he was devotedly attached, and the cause of his dislike for his supposed father was probably to be found in the fact that he was aware that Renaud subjected Adrienne to a species of annoyance that was little short of persecution. Renaud, in short, had never ceased to urge Adrienne to become his wife, and the more power he gained the more he endeavoured to coerce her into compliance with his wishes.

It might have been thought that, seeing he was able to rise without her aid, he would have ceased to desire her as his wife. For though she was distinguished for a charming amiability of disposition, she had no beauty to commend her. But, with the persistency and determination which were characteristic of him, he had never allowed the matter to rest. His vanity had, no doubt, been wounded by her equally persistent refusals, and so he had resolved not to

* A queen's page at the period with which we are dealing was not, it must be understood, a menial position. On the contrary, it was one carrying with it considerable responsibility and honour. It was customary for sons of noblemen to be made royal pages, and they were subsequently given commissions in the army.—THE AUTHOR.

let her rest. But his strongest reason of all was the considerable fortune she possessed. On her part, she had come to look upon him with aversion, and she had on divers occasions lodged a complaint with her Majesty against him. • But these complaints were always fruitless, for Renaud professed to be an earnest Catholic, and ready at any moment to sacrifice his life in defence of his Queen. With such a partisan, therefore, Mary was not likely to quarrel; and, as a matter of fact, she would rather have parted with Adrienne than with Renaud. Adrienne had come to recognise this, and latterly had refrained from mentioning the subject to the Queen, while studiously avoiding Renaud. This had annoyed him very much, for it still further wounded his vanity, and he resolved to humble her in some way.

He knew that it was difficult to get a private interview with her, and so one day sent a servant, who was in his pay, to inform her that François, then absent with the Queen, had forwarded her a message, and the messenger awaited her pleasure in the picture-gallery.

Adrienne was delighted when she heard this, for she had pined much for François, and she said she would repair at once to the picture-gallery. She was the first there, but had not many minutes to wait before a door opened and Renaud presented himself.

He was hardly the same Renaud whose acquaintance we first made in Paris. He had since then acquired all the habits and bearings of a courtier. His movements were slow and dignified, as befitted one of her Majesty's chief physicians. There was an imperiousness in his tone and bearing towards those whom he considered his inferiors, and, like all men who rise to power by such means as he had risen by, he loved to display his power and make his influence felt. He was still a young man, hardly yet in the prime of life, but his face wore an anxious expression, and an habitual frown caused him to look older than he really was. He was handsomely dressed now. He wore shoes with high red heels and ornamented with diamond buckles; black hose, purple velvet trunks, and a tunic of the very richest velvet, which was relieved by a very large and costly point-lace collar, fastened at the throat by a small diamond clasp. The velvet scabbard of his rapier was beautifully embroidered, and the handle of the rapier itself was set with jewels.

Adrienne started as he came in, and she said with marked indignation :

'I am deceived, then, unless thou art the bearer of a message from François ?'

Renaud smiled coldly, and bowed stiffly as he said :

'I am *not* the bearer of a message from François ; but I used that argument, sweet Adrienne, to make sure that thou wouldst come to my bidding.'

'Then thou hast been guilty of an act of meanness,' she answered angrily.

'Love justifies all things,' he responded.

'Wherefore art thou so persistent?' she asked. 'For years thou hast pursued me, and yet thou art well aware that I can never wed thee.'

'That thou hast often told me,' he said sternly ; 'and yet, nothing daunted, I have hoped that some day I might break down thy prejudice.'

'I have no prejudice,' she returned quickly, 'but wherefore do you persecute me.'

'Nay, use not such a hard term as *persecute*,' he answered. 'I am persistent and determined, and having set my mind upon doing a thing, I am not easily turned from my purpose. My memory goes back to that July night in Paris when I confessed that thou wert precious to me, and thou in return told me of thy love. Then, on the following day when my hopes were high, they were destroyed by thy mysterious refusal to be my wife. What *was* the mystery? What led thee to snatch the cup of happiness from my lips? Often have I asked thee this, and yet as often hast thou refused to tell me. Now I am shunned by thee. Wherefore? The more I dwell upon this, the stronger grows my feeling that I should no longer live under a shadow with respect to thee. If thou knowest aught against me, speak. I have a right to demand explanation of thy conduct.'

'I know of nothing against thee,' she said with some confusion.

'Why, then, have I incurred thy hatred?'

'Not hatred; but thou hast annoyed me, and I have felt angry.'

'But there was a time when thou didst love me. Was it not so?'

'It was,' she answered, growing more confused.

'What killed that love?'

‘It was not killed then.’

‘Why, then, didst thou not become my wife?’ he demanded in a determined tone that startled her, so that she looked up with alarm depicted on her face, and she seemed to be puzzled what to say. But after a pause, during which she made up her mind, she answered:

‘I will tell thee, an thou wilt promise to henceforth let me go my way and seek no more to influence me to become thine.’

‘Why shouldst thou try to exact such a promise as that from me?’ he asked with some anger.

She looked at him fixedly for some little time; then, laying stress upon her words, she asked:

‘Art thou so dull that thou canst not read my thoughts?’

A cynical sneer spread itself over his face as he made answer:

‘I should be dull indeed an I could not. Thou wouldst, an thou hadst the courage, tell me that thy love is dead. Eh? Am I wrong?’

‘No, thou art right,’ she said firmly.

‘So, we have come to an understanding at last?’ he replied with great bitterness; ‘and I perceive now that during all these years I have pursued a shadow—a shadow that has lured me and mocked me. Well, so be it. The loss may be thine, not mine.’

‘It may,’ she answered.

‘And now tell me what thou hast to tell,’ he observed sharply.

‘Have I thy promise?’

‘Yes,’ he growled.

‘Then hear the reason. On the night that thou told thy love, I was warned, on pain of certain death, not to be thy wife.’

Renaud, who had been staring in an absent sort of way through an open window, turned suddenly as if he had been struck; and his flushed face and flashing eyes told how deeply her words had affected him.

‘Who was it who gave thee this warning?’ he demanded almost fiercely, clenching his fists and fixing his blazing eyes upon her as she stood pale, trembling, and agitated before him.

‘I know not,’ she answered.

Evidently thinking that she was purposely holding back the

information he sought, he allowed his passion to get the better of him, and, losing his temper, he hissed :

'Woman, thou liest, and I will wring the secret from thee !'

At the same moment he seized her violently by the wrist, bruising and reddening her white arm.

For a moment she was startled, and turned deathly pale. Then strong indignation at the unmerited outrage brought a hot flush into her face, and, wrenching herself free from his grasp, she cried :

'Shame on thee for a poltroon ! Know, sir, that I lie not, and be assured that the insult thou hast put upon me shall not go unavenged.'

He saw at once that he had made a grave blunder, and he exclaimed apologetically :

'Nay, dear lady, be lenient with me, for an thy love for me be dead, mine for thee still lives. Thy words maddened me; but thou art generous and wilt forgive.'

A look of contempt and scorn came into her face as she said, with lofty dignity :

'A man that loves a woman lays not his hand upon her in anger. Thou hast subjected me to an indignity that an thou wert the King I would not tolerate. And thou mayst yet find to thy cost that thou hast made a relentless enemy.'

'Thou art a woman, and should be gentle,' he said, hoarsely and pleadingly.

'I should be less than a woman an I failed to resent thy gross outrage and thy charge of falsehood. But know this, that I speak not falsely. The warning to which I refer was conveyed to me not by word of mouth, but a poniard was stuck into the table of my sleeping-chamber, and attached to the handle of the weapon was a slip of parchment, on which the words were written. Those words affected me strongly, and, attaching grave importance to them, I resolved not to accede to thy request. But though I could not be thy wife I would have been thy friend. Now, however, thou hast made me thine enemy.'

Turning from him quickly, and with an angry gesture, she swept out of the gallery before he could utter a word or make a movement to stop her.

Amazed into dumbness by her sudden and unexpected display of energy and temper, he stood for some minutes

irresolute and awed. Gradually he returned to his normal condition. Then, drawing himself up, a smile of defiant scorn wreathed itself about his mouth, and between close-set teeth he muttered :

‘Thou hast threatened me, sweet lady, but thy threats shall recoil on thine own head. I have an effectual weapon wherewith to smite thee. That weapon is François, and through him I will break thy heart.’

CHAPTER XII.

THE PHYSICIAN AND THE FOOL.

THE information Renaud had received from Adrienne de Bois was certainly food for reflection, and it caused him no little chagrin. He had been defeated in one of his projects by an unseen enemy, and though he had climbed far up the ladder without Adrienne’s help, he nevertheless had lost, in losing her, a considerable fortune.

The incidents of that July night in Paris, when he had asked Adrienne to become his wife, he vividly recalled, and he remembered how he had imagined that twice he saw the figure of a man in the ante-room through which he passed to reach the balcony. He had then, and for long after, attributed this to some delusion of the brain. But now, in associating it with what he had learned from Adrienne, he came to the conclusion that he had been watched, that his footsteps had been dogged and his movements noted by a spy. *Who was the spy?* To that question only one answer framed itself in his mind, and the answer was—Basile.

For years he had treated Basile as he might have treated a mangy dog, and patiently and uncomplainingly the Jester had endured it all, for he was perfectly well aware of his own powerlessness. Both men mutually though tacitly agreed to hate each other, though in Basile’s case the hate had to be silent, for it could find no means to display itself except in scowling looks: for how could the poor buffoon hope to make himself heard against the favourite Court physician, who had climbed to power by unscrupulous means, it is true, but whose power was absolute, nevertheless? On the other hand, Renaud was enabled in a variety of ways to give practical effect to his

hatred, notwithstanding that he really had no control of any kind over the Jester, and yet he managed to make his life a burden to him. But although the Jester was silent, and offered no open resistance to the persecution he was subjected to, he was not quite the harmless worm he was thought to be, as will be seen later on.

After parting from Adrienne, Renaud retired to his chamber, and sat for some time pondering on what had taken place. His was a small but elegant room, hung with costly tapestry and furnished with massive and exquisitely-carved furniture. He sat for some time in moody silence, regretting deeply that he had offended Adrienne, and trying to think of some plan whereby he might propitiate her again. At length he summoned his page, and said :

‘Bastian, go thou and seek Basile the Jester, and bid him attend me here. I would have speech with him, and during the interview conceal thyself in the secret recess.’

Bastian was a low-browed, cunning-looking man of about six-and-twenty. He was much attached to his master, and in him Renaud found a ready and faithful servant ; and though he had never tested to what extent the man’s fidelity was to be trusted, he was disposed to think he would be able to exact from Bastian any service, even though it should involve crime.

Bowing to his master, Bastian left the room to execute his orders. Half an hour later Basile presented himself.

He had altered very much in appearance. His face wore an expression of melancholy, he looked careworn and haggard. He was thin, and seemed ill, and was prematurely aged.

He made no obeisance as he entered, but, on the contrary, his bearing expressed haughtiness and defiance.

‘Thou hast sent for me,’ he remarked abruptly.

Renaud did not reply for some moments ; then with equal abruptness said :

‘Thou hast a good memory, fool.’

‘Ay, better than thou wouldst wish me to have, an thou hadst the ordering of it,’ answered the Jester sneeringly.

‘Thou hast a saucy tongue,’ Renaud remarked, with growing anger.

‘Even as thou hast a lying one,’ Basile retorted.

Renaud started. He bit his lip with passion, and menacingly grasped the jewelled handle of the small dagger he invariably carried at his waist.

‘Have a care, fool—have a care,’ he growled.

With a quick, agile movement Basile plunged his hand into the breast of his doublet and drew forth a gleaming poniard.

‘Threaten me not,’ he cried passionately, ‘for, as thou mayest perceive, two can carry daggers.’

Renaud was alarmed and surprised, for this was the first time his victim had ever displayed any spirit or disposition to resent the persecution to which he was subjected.

‘Put thy weapon up, man,’ said Renaud, with a forced laugh. ‘I did but joke; and thou knowest well it is contrary to the rules of the Queen’s Court that fools should carry lethal weapons.’

‘That is true, Master Renaud,’ answered the Jester; ‘but knowing what I know of thee, I felt that when thou desired to see me alone in thy chamber, I had best come prepared to take my own part. We are alone, and for the time being I am thy equal. Thou art an adventurer, and thou knowest well that I am aware of it. And now face to face and man to man, and with no eye to see us and no ear to hear us, I tell thee to beware, for even a fool may know how to be revenged.’

Renaud smiled sardonically, and though he was pale to deathliness, he was perfectly collected and cool, and he said with marked emphasis, and a pause between each word:

‘Thou hast made a small mistake, good Basile. What ho, there, Bastian!’ A velvet curtain screening a recess was partly lifted, and Bastian the page stepped forth, and stood like a statue, waiting his master’s further orders. Basile fairly reeled, and in his amazement his dagger fell from his hand on to the floor. ‘Thou wilt perceive that there has been a witness to our interview,’ Renaud continued, in the same cool and emphatic way. ‘Dost recognise now the false position in which thou hast placed thyself, fool?’ Basile was silent, and Renaud went on: ‘Thou hast threatened one of her Majesty’s officers, and drawn a weapon against him. That is *petit treason*, and in thy case the penalty is *death*. But I will for the time spare thee. Bastian, thou canst retire from the room.’ The page bowed, and went out by the doorway. ‘And now, fool, answer me: to what extent didst thou play the spy on my movements when I first came to the Court in Paris?’

Basile had by this time recovered himself to some extent. He saw clearly that his enemy decidedly had the advantage over him so far, but knowing what he did know, he was not

disposed to eat dirt at the bidding of a man whom he despised, and whom he also knew was an impostor. Before speaking, the Jester stooped to pick up the fallen dagger, but Renaud instantly covered it with his foot, and said firmly :

‘Thou must not touch that weapon again.’ Then he picked it up himself and placed it in his girdle.

In spite of this, Basile was not cowed ; his presence of mind had returned, and he looked defiantly as he made answer :

‘Thou mayst be an inquisitor, but, leastways, thou art not my confessor, and I decline to confess to thee.’

‘Have a care how thou triflest with me,’ cried Renaud, with flashing eyes.

‘Have a care thyself,’ retorted Basile, ‘lest, being stung to desperation, I unmask thee.’

‘Thou durst not,’ said Renaud quickly, and, though trying to appear unconcerned, giving evident signs in his tone and manner that the threat had brought a fear into his heart.

‘Durst not !’ echoed the Jester.

‘Those were my words,’ said Renaud.

‘And wherefore dare I not?’

‘Because, firstly, thou wouldst not be believed, for I would swear that thou wert diseased in the brain ; and, secondly, because if thou shouldst utter a single word against me, no power on earth could save thee. Thy life should pay the forfeit.’

Renaud smiled cynically, and the haggard expression in Basile’s face seemed to increase. The poor Jester was crushed. He knew only too well that he could not hope to make himself heard against Renaud, who was as pitiless as he was unscrupulous.

‘The triumph is thine for the moment, Master Renaud,’ he said sadly ; ‘but it may not always be so.’

‘Keep thy veiled threats to thyself ; it were better so,’ Renaud answered disdainfully. ‘And now to the business that caused me to send for thee. Thou knowest that years ago I sought to make Mademoiselle de Bois my wife ?’

‘Yes.’

‘Aha !’ cried Renaud exultingly, ‘how didst thou know it?’

‘I guessed it,’ said the Jester, looking sternly at Renaud, from whose face the exultant expression faded again, and he answered :

‘Thou liest, knave.’

‘Knave to thyself,’ exclaimed Basile, with more fierceness than he had hitherto displayed.

Renaud did not relish this quick retort. The accusation struck home, and he winced. He looked upon the man before him with scorn and revengeful feelings ; but he knew that he was a power that must be reckoned with ; and however much he might desire him out of his way, it was not an easy thing to remove him. He had sent for him to try and discover whether he had had any hand in preventing Adrienne de Bois from becoming his wife ; but he had quite failed to accomplish his purpose, and in Basile’s present frame of mind it was doubtful if he would succeed if he kept him there for hours longer. Renaud was conscious now that he had not managed the interview with diplomacy, and, moreover, it dawned upon him that, instead of making the Jester his enemy, it would be better to try and conciliate him.

There was a long pause, then Basile said :

‘If thou hast finished with me I will take my leave,’ and he turned to go.

‘Stay,’ cried Renaud.

‘What is thy pleasure now ?’ asked the Jester sullenly.

‘I would ask thee if it is not to our interests that there should be peace between me and thee ?’

‘Peace !’ exclaimed Basile, with a sneering laugh. ‘It has taken thee a goodly number of years to come to that opinion. Peace, forsooth ! After thou hast wronged me, and heaped upon me every insult, thou wouldst make peace. By the Mass, I would rather die a dog’s death than accept aught from thy hands ! No, Master Renaud, there can be no peace while thou and I live under one roof.’

Renaud was humiliated. He had not expected such a rebuff. He thought that this man whom he so despised would have jumped at the chance of a reconciliation, instead of which he scornfully spurned it. Renaud inwardly chafed, but, preserving a calm demeanour, he said quietly :

‘Think again.’

‘I require no thinking. If I have borne thy rebuffs patiently, it has been with a purpose ; but some day we will have a reckoning.’

‘It is war between us, then,’ Renaud remarked bitterly.

‘Ay, war to the death an thou wilt,’ answered Basile, with a despairing sigh.

‘So be it,’ said Renaud between his teeth. ‘Go thy ways. The future shall decide between us.’

Basile seemed greatly depressed. He turned to go, but stopped when he got to the door, and, looking back, said :

‘Answer me this : Hast thou any love for Adrienne de Bois ?’

Renaud stared at the speaker in amazement. Then, breaking into a laugh, he said :

‘Art thou serious in thy question ?’

‘Ay, as God witnesseth !’ answered Basile, with a sort of sob.

Renaud was puzzled, and looked at the Jester as though he thought he had taken leave of his senses. Then, after a pause, he demanded :

‘What is the purport of thy question ?’

‘Answer me what I have asked, before thou seekest to fathom my motives,’ Basile returned.

Renaud was more puzzled, but suddenly, as an idea flashed across his mind, he made answer quickly and emphatically :

‘Adrienne de Bois is dearer to me than life, and that man who dares to let even his shadow come between her and me, shall die as surely as I stand here now.’

Basile’s face darkened, and the lines of care seemed to deepen. He approached close to Renaud, and, peering into his eyes, hissed these words :

‘Knave I knew thee to be. Now out of thine own lips thou art a self-convicted liar, for thou hast no love for Adrienne de Bois. Have a care, or, an thou subject her to wrong, the coat of mail is not made that shall shield thy heart from my dagger.’

He flung himself out of the room, and Renaud stood like one on whom some spell had been wrought that had turned him to stone. What did this mean ? he thought. Was this humble Jester mad, or could it be possible that he had the audacity to love Adrienne de Bois ? The thing seemed preposterous ; and yet, as Renaud reflected, he knew that cases were not rare where humbly-born men aspired to gain the affections of high-bred women. Basile had much to recommend him. He was remarkably handsome, with splendidly-proportioned limbs, and he seldom failed to win the admiration of the opposite sex. One thing Renaud could not ignore—and that was that he had made a bitter enemy of the Jester.

He felt somehow that he was baffled : baffled first by Adrienne, and now by this fool, whom he affected to despise, but whom he knew to be a standing danger and an ever-present menace to him.

CHAPTER XIII.

WHEN THE SHADOWS WERE DEEPENING.

It would not be easy to adequately describe the burning indignation Adrienne de Bois felt at the treatment that she had been subjected to at the hands of Renaud. If she had ever loved him, but it is doubtful if she had, it is certain that her feelings had now undergone a complete revulsion, and she literally hated him.

As she sat alone in her room, she wept with bitterness, for she was truly unhappy, and was overpowered with a sense of loneliness. For a long time the cares of State seemed to have so absorbed the Queen's attention that many of her early companions and old favourites were forgotten and neglected. Adrienne was one of those who had suffered in this way. But as compensation she had found consolation in François. Attention to him had given her occupation and unspeakable pleasure. But now he had gone with his royal mistress to the wars, and Adrienne pined at his absence, and felt more than ever lonely.

Reflecting now on what had occurred, she could not see who was going to champion her. Her want of good looks had kept wooers away, though there were plenty of needy adventurers about the Court who would have been glad enough to have married her for her fortune. But she despised them, knowing as she did that it was her money, and not herself, they coveted. Even if she had appealed to the Queen, she could hardly have hoped to have got a hearing ; for Renaud had made himself a favourite with Mary, partly by his professed zeal in the Catholic cause, and partly by his demonstrative devotion, which he never lost an opportunity of displaying before her Majesty. These thoughts served to show Adrienne that, as matters stood at present, she had nobody to whom she could appeal, nobody to take into her confidence, and ask to avenge the insult of Renaud. She decided therefore to hold her peace at present, and wait the course of events, hoping that time and circumstances would

work in her favour. Nor had she to wait long for this. It is the unexpected that always happens, and it was so in her case.

It chanced one evening, less than a week after that painful interview with Renaud, that she was walking alone in the shrubbery. There had been great rejoicing throughout the palace that day, for news had come by special messengers that the Queen had gained great victories, and, having completely routed her enemies, was returning home in triumph. Adrienne had not heard this news unmoved, for apart from the pleasure she felt that the Queen had triumphed, she experienced a sense of intense delight at the prospect of seeing François, her foster son, again before many days had passed. She was lighter-hearted now than she had been for some time, and wishing to be alone with her thoughts, she had wandered into the shrubbery, where she often went when she was in a reflective mood.

It was a beautiful evening, twilight had softened down all the surroundings, and had given a solemn impressiveness to the scenery. The old palace, with its turrets and towers and many windows, looked strangely picturesque in the uncertain light; while the distant hills were shadowy and purple, with their outlines cut sharply against the dark amber sky.

In the shrubbery there was a long straight path, shadowed with partially overarching trees. This was a favourite retreat with Adrienne, and when she wished to be alone with her thoughts, she always came here when the weather permitted. She felt very pensive on this particular evening. She was elated at the prospect of soon seeing François again. But her elation was tempered with some sadness, for she felt that the time had come when she could no longer hope to have much of François's society. He had entered into manhood, new ideas and things would occupy his attention, and he would want other company than hers. Her mission had, in fact, ended. For a number of years she had watched over him, and tended him with all a mother's care. But he no longer required her care, and her task was done.

With a sensitive woman such a reflection as this could not fail to beget a sense of sadness, and especially was it so in Adrienne's case, for her very position caused her to feel more acutely than otherwise she might have done; for was she not away from her native country, while all her relations and friends were in France? And then there was another thing

that was certainly calculated to sour her disposition. Nature had been so unkind to her in regard to looks, that she must abandon every hope of ever enjoying a husband's love; for though she might have entered into the marriage state, such a marriage, so far as her husband was concerned, would only have been a marriage of convenience—not of love. She had nothing now beyond her fortune to attract. Even the influence that she had once possessed with Queen Mary no longer existed, so that she was painfully aware that she now occupied an anomalous position, and was, in point of fact, a mere nonentity in the Court. If she were to die, none would mourn her, and if she went away her absence would not be noticed.

Agitated by various conflicting emotions, she promenaded up and down for some time. The purple gloom of the hills had deepened; the amber had faded from the sky, and the stars were asserting themselves, while the black mass of the palace was only relieved by the light that streamed from many of its numerous windows.

Suddenly Adrienne became aware that someone was approaching. She was a little startled, and wondered who it could be, for the shrubbery was private. But she was not long kept in suspense, for a voice said:

‘Art thou reading thy fate in the stars, lady, that thou art here alone at so solemn an hour?’

She instantly recognised the voice as Basile's, and the fear which had possessed her gave place to joyfulness, for she liked Basile. He had always shown her such marked respect, and oftentimes he amused her when she felt sad. And then again, secretly, in her woman's heart, she had admired him. He was so handsome, so shapely of limb—what woman could fail to do that? But never a look, never a word, on her part had betrayed her feelings to him; and he never by sign nor sound had indicated that he forgot that he was only a Court jester, and she a lady far, far above him in the social scale.

‘Why, Basile, thou hast come so suddenly upon me,’ she said, ‘that thou hast quickened my pulses with fright. As to my fate in the stars, fain would I read it, but I know not how.’

‘Wouldst thou have me play the rôle of fortune-teller to thee, lady sweet?’

‘In truth would I, an thou couldst; but thou art better able

to make me smile at thy wit, than to tell me aught of what lies before me in the mystic future.'

'It may be so, and yet can I tell thee some things that are new to thee, and of which thou hast not dreamed.'

'Wherefore dost thou speak so solemnly to-night, good Basile?' she asked with newly-awakened interest, not unmixed with curiosity. 'It is not thy wont to be solemn.'

'Ah, lady,' he sighed, 'the fool's face and the jester's smile may often mock his aching heart.'

Adrienne broke into a little laugh as she said thoughtlessly, 'Why, Basile, thou hast surely no heart. Methought that it was only women who possessed such a thing as that.'

'God pity me!' he exclaimed in a sobbing tone, that caused Adrienne to cry out in surprise:

'Nay, if I have wounded thee, forgive me. I meant it not.'

'Thou hast not wounded me. Thou art too gentle for that. But I have a heart and thoughts, Mademoiselle Adrienne; and sometimes they trouble me.'

Adrienne could not see the Jester's face, but the tone of his voice told her that he was suffering in some way, and so, wishing to give another turn to the conversation, she said sweetly:

'Poor Basile, thou must take proper care of thy heart; and let not thy thoughts trouble it. But come, let me test thy skill as a seer. And mark ye this, sir,' she added with mock gravity, 'an thou wouldst not incur my lasting displeasure, tell me only those things that are pleasant.'

'An I had the ordering of thy future, lady, in very truth it should be all pleasantry,' Basile answered; 'but thou art in a jesting mood, whereas I—well, God knows, I am very sober.'

There was something in the man's manner that struck Adrienne, if it did not actually startle her, and thinking perhaps that he was in the possession of some ill tidings, she said quickly:

'If thou hast aught to tell me, tell it at once, for suspense is worse than certainty.'

'The hour and the place are suited to what I have to say,' he answered gravely. 'There is a shadow over thee, and it may be that there is trouble in thy path.'

Adrienne shuddered as she remarked:

'Pray do not fill me with forebodings. If thou canst say nothing better than that I will leave thee, for I am nervous.'

‘Thou hast naught to fear, and yet thou hast an enemy,’ answered Basile.

‘How knowest thou that?’ she asked eagerly.

‘As I know many things. By keeping my eyes open.’

‘Is it man or woman?’

‘Man.’

‘And his name?’

‘Is Renaud,’ Basile replied.

Adrienne uttered a suppressed scream, and was unusually agitated.

‘Thy assertion requires proof,’ she said in a voice that rose little above a whisper.

‘I could give thee ample proof that he is a traitor and a knave.’

‘Such language as that, sir, about one who holds so high a position in the Court, is dangerous,’ she exclaimed with affected indignation.

Basile was not deceived by her show of indignation, nor did he waver in the purpose that had brought him there, for he had come to her by design, and not by accident.

‘I fear no such danger,’ he answered. ‘I warn thee solemnly against Monsieur Renaud. He wears a mask, and it is in my power to tear it off and show that he is an impostor.’

‘Thou art bold,’ she said, scarcely knowing what to say, and yet feeling somehow that he spoke the truth.

‘I am honest,’ he answered. Then, after a pause, he added: ‘Renaud seeks thee for his wife, but it were better that thou shouldst die than wed him. For he would darken thy life and break thy heart.’

‘How long hast thou had this opinion?’ Adrienne asked with growing surprise, and feeling altogether at a loss to account for the sudden interest in her welfare on the part of Basile.

‘For years,’ he answered.

‘Then wherefore hast thou so long kept silent?’

‘That is a question I must not answer now; but thou mayst rest assured that I have had a substantial reason.’

‘I fain would know thy reason,’ Adrienne remarked with some pique at what she considered Basile’s unnecessary reticence.

‘And maybe some day I will tell it to thee.’

‘Some day,’ she echoed. ‘Some day may never come. I demand to know thy secret now.’

‘Thy demand, lady, must remain unsatisfied,’ Basile answered firmly but respectfully.

Adrienne felt annoyed at having her very natural curiosity thus balked, and though she tried not to show this annoyance, she could not help doing so, as she said with some irony in her tone :

‘Since thou hast such a fund of knowledge, good Basile, is there nothing else thou canst tell me, seeing how eager I am for news?’

She had no particular object in asking this question, unless, perhaps, in a certain shadowy way she thought it might elicit something further about Renaud. She was therefore scarcely prepared for the answer she received.

‘Ay, that can I,’ he said.

‘Well, proceed then. I am all ears.’

‘I can tell thee a story.’

‘Pshaw!’ she exclaimed petulantly, and feeling disappointed, ‘I want not thy stories.’

‘Nay, but the one I have to tell will interest thee much.’

‘What is the subject?’ she asked somewhat sharply.

‘Love,’ he answered.

CHAPTER XIV.

HOW A FOOL TOLD HIS LOVE.

‘PAH!’ she exclaimed, ‘the theme is too mouldy.’

‘It is ancient, and yet ever new,’ he returned, ‘and I crave thy permission to recite my tale.’

‘Some other time, good Basile,’ she answered languidly. ‘The dew is falling, and the night grows chill. I must away to my chamber, an I would avoid a sickness.’

‘Stay, lady, I pray thee; and if thou wouldst deign to wear it, I would offer thee my cloak to keep thee warm.’

Adrienne was amused, and by no means displeased by his attention, and she said pleasantly :

‘By'r Lady, but I am half tempted to hear thy story, an thou wilt pledge thyself that it lacks not interest.’

‘That will I do.’

‘Give me thy cloak, then. So. It is well lined, and I feel the comfort of it. And now to thy tale.’

'It were better that thou shouldst be seated,' he answered. 'Thou couldst listen then with more ease. In the bower yonder there is a seat. Let me lead thee there.'

She was rather surprised that he should make such a request, and hesitated to comply with it, remarking :

'Thou art grown bold, Basile, and reckless. What thinkest thou the vulgar voice of scandal would say an we were seen sitting in the bower ?'

'We will not be seen save by yon watching stars, and they tell no secrets,' he answered.

She still found some difficulty in making up her mind ; but in a little while her curiosity overcame her prudence. She thought that he must have some weighty purpose ; and though he had spoken of a love-story, she deemed it probable that Renaud would figure in it. In fact, she expected a revelation in which he would appear in a discreditable way ; for after what Basile had said about him, she inferred that the Jester knew much more, and that she would learn that she had been befooled by Renaud, whose love was elsewhere. It was really this feeling that prompted her to go, and she said at last :

'Come, then, to the bower ; and get thy story quickly told, for I must not linger.'

Basile led the way, and she followed. The bower was so dark that nothing was to be seen. A sudden feeling came over her that it was not right to be there at such an hour, and under such circumstances. But she conquered the feeling, for she had a conviction now that a revelation was about to be made, and that it was to her interest to listen to it. So she seated herself, and she knew that he sat down opposite her. She shuddered a little, she could not tell why, and drew the cloak closer about her shoulders. There was a weird sound in the night wind, as it went sighing through the leaves, and there were ghostly rustlings all around, while the faint light of the stars gave a spectral aspect to the trees and shrubs.

'Quickly, now, to thy story,' she said in a subdued voice.

'Thou art impatient, lady.'

'In truth I am,' she cried, stamping her foot. 'Wherefore art thou so tedious ? An thou art not quick in the telling of that thou hast to tell, I must away.'

'Nay, gentle lady, be not so impetuous,' he pleaded. 'It were well that thou shouldst have patience. My story begins

years ago, and recounts the secret love of one who is as dear to me as myself.'

'Secret love!' exclaimed Adrienne. 'Come, that is interesting. But why was the love of thy friend secret?'

'Because he looked above him—even as high as the stars.'

'He was audacious, then,' she remarked.

'No; but he was mad—though mad only with love, for love often makes men mad. He loved in silence, save when no human ears were near to hear—then he sighed; and there were times, too, when he wept.'

'Poor fellow!'

'Ah, Mademoiselle Adrienne. An you but knew how much he suffered, you would not speak so slightly.'

'Nay, Basile, I am full of pity, believe me. But, tell me, did the youth die?'

'No; he lives still. He has been content to live in the shadow of her who was more precious to him than life. He has watched her and followed her, always unknown and in silence, and his love, like a smouldering fire, has almost burnt his heart to ashes.'

'By'r Lady, but that is sad,' Adrienne said, scarcely able to suppress a laugh.

'You do but mock. It were better, perhaps, that I told you no more,' Basile answered with some warmth.

'No, no; mistake me not, good Basile. I am very serious; in truth I am. Therefore proceed.'

'It is a mournful story,' he went on; 'for love that is not requited is like a malady that slowly and painfully slays.'

'But who was or is this lady whom the lowly youth so devoutly adored?' asked Adrienne.

'One who in his eyes was fairer than a lily, and more beautiful than the morning star.'

'In very truth she must have been a wonder,' exclaimed Adrienne, with an appearance of levity, though in reality she was far from being frivolous; for she was somewhat nervous as to her position. If by any possible chance it should become known that she had had a secret meeting with Basile, her reputation would be seriously compromised; for appearances would be decidedly against her, however innocent she might be, and in spite of any explanation she could offer. She knew this, and therefore she felt unhappy and uneasy; and though on the one hand she was burning to know what Basile's

purpose was, on the other she felt that she ought not to allow him to proceed. She experienced a difficulty, however, in making up her mind, for her genuine liking for Basile caused her to shrink from wilfully wounding his feelings. But there was another view she took, which more directly interested her. It was this. Her isolated position in the Court, so to speak, placed her at a great disadvantage, and she saw clearly how Renaud could injure her, and she would be powerless to protect herself or to retaliate. She had discovered how unscrupulous he was, and how utterly indifferent he was to other interests where they clashed with his own.

Fear of him, therefore, and want of a protector, disposed her to accept assistance even from the Court Jester. She did not pause to consider in what way he could assist her. It was enough for her to know that he was a man; that though of humble origin he was a privileged person in the Court; that he had peculiar advantages and frequent opportunities of knowing what was going on behind the scenes; that, like the majority of the race of jesters, he was intelligent and quick-witted, and so could hardly fail to be a valuable ally. In short, she knew perfectly well that she might use Basile to her own advantage, and secretly play him off against Renaud.

This was, of course, descending to intrigue, but the exigencies of her unfortunate position made it almost unavoidable. Besides, she felt that the Jester was to be trusted—for his class were born diplomatists. Humble in origin though they were, they breathed an atmosphere of royalty, and learned from their earliest years that the fierce light which beats upon a palace is apt to magnify into great faults things and acts that in other less exalted stations in life would never be observed. And this knowledge early instilled naturally developed caution in a large degree, and made even a Court dependent a diplomat.

Some such thoughts as the foregoing certainly occupied her mind at that moment, and inclined her to run some risk and to propitiate Basile. He on his part must have felt pretty sure of his ground, or he would never have ventured thus far. But he also possessed certain knowledge, which to him was power, and placed in his hands a weapon wherewith to strike his enemy—his enemy in this case being Renaud. Moreover, knowing, as he had made it his business to know, that Renaud had long desired to marry Adrienne, but that his attentions

were distasteful to her, the chances of his winning her favour were infinitely greater.

Replying to her last remark, he said:

'She is a wonder—to him, at any rate. To him she is even as a blazing star, whose brilliancy dazzles him, so that dazed and yearningly he gazes ever towards her, while all else around him, owing to her light, which fills his eyes, appears black and meaningless.'

Adrienne was really amazed at the man's eloquence, and though she could not see his face, she knew intuitively that his eyes were fixed upon her. She wished herself away one instant, and the next desired to stay. She wanted to hear his story to the end, but would have preferred to have heard it in the light, although the darkness gave her this advantage—it prevented her face from betraying her feelings.

'I think, Basile,' she said timidly—'I think thou hadst better reserve the rest of thy story for another day, and to be told in some other place.'

'Nay, Mademoiselle Adrienne,' he exclaimed; 'it must be told now or never. And as for the place, could mortal man choose a more fitting one for a love-story? But what I have to tell concerns thee closely, and therefore I crave thy hearing.'

'Proceed quickly, then,' she said with some agitation; 'an thy story is meant as a parable, thou need'st not make it long. And if, as thou sayest, it concerns me closely, keep me not in suspense, but come at once to the point thou wouldst illustrate.'

'Give me leave, Mistress Adrienne, to tell it in my own way,' he answered. 'The story covers a space of many years, and therefore cannot be told in a few minutes. It begins when the lady was a bright-eyed child, with a wealth of dark ringlets clustering about her white shoulders, and he, a nameless youth, gazing with rapture on her, even as one might gaze on a vision.'

'It is a veritable romance,' Adrienne remarked, for the sake of saying something to fill up a pause.

'A romance in very truth,' he said; 'for she was far up above him, and the poor youth could not, dare not attempt to reach her. He could only sigh in his loneliness, and curse the fate that had made the gulf between them.'

'Poor boy!' Adrienne remarked feelingly. 'But tell me, good Basile, did not time cure him of his hopeless passion?'

‘Alas! no. He and she grew up together—yet always parted by that gulf.’

‘And breathed he no syllable of his love?’

‘No. Neither by word nor look did he ever tell her how fierce was his passion.’

‘Love should have no fear,’ Adrienne remarked.

‘Thou art forgetting,’ Basile answered, ‘that the lady was exalted, and the youth was very humble.’

‘But love levels,’ said Adrienne.

‘Ah, sayest thou so?’ cried Basile eagerly; and Adrienne became very agitated as she perceived how she had committed herself by the thoughtless remark. ‘If she for whom this man sighs would say so and think so from her heart, his happiness would be complete,’ Basile added.

Adrienne was confused, and scarcely knew what to say in response, and for a moment an impulse came upon her to get up and go away as fast as she could without uttering another word. But she conquered this impulse, because it seemed to her a somewhat foolish thing, after having consented to listen so long. Then, in order to somewhat counteract the effects of her words, she said:

‘Of course I mean that love levels only when there is love on both sides.’

‘Ay, that is so,’ Basile remarked in an absent-minded sort of way, and with such a long-drawn sigh that a chord of sympathy was struck in his listener’s breast, and she could not refrain from saying:

‘Thou art full of sorrow to-night, Basile. Whence comes that sigh?’

‘From my heart,’ he answered.

‘But why should *thy* heart be stricken?’

‘I will tell thee, lady,’ he said with great earnestness. ‘And since thou art so pitiful, thou wilt, I am sure, advise me. Is that not so?’

‘An it comes within my power to give advice that is worth receiving, then thou canst count upon it,’ she answered, growing more and more uneasy, and wishing that she could invent some excuse for putting an end to the interview. ‘But,’ she added, ‘my poor judgment is so apt to be wrong, that I am fain to believe it were better in thy interests that thou shouldst appeal to someone more qualified than I am.’

‘Thou art traitor to thyself now,’ he said; ‘and unwittingly

thou art mocking me. Thy judgment, and thine alone, I would receive in this matter, for I am the man of whom I have spoken.'

'Thou!' exclaimed Adrienne, evincing surprise, but feeling none.

'Even I, lady. I, from my lowly position, have dared to gaze up to the height where she shines like a star. Tell me, tell me, I implore thee, should I confess my love, and risk her fiery scorn, or keep it secret in my breast, and die with the burden of it?'

'Thou imposest upon me a task full of delicacy,' Adrienne replied in distress, and feeling that she was only becoming more hopelessly entangled in the net that he had spread for her. 'An I knew the lady, then might I answer thee. Women have ere now stooped to lowly men, and raised them to their level. But so much depends on circumstances, and in this instance I have nothing to guide me.'

Basile was silent for a little while. The pause was an awkward one for Adrienne, for she knew not how he had taken her remarks, since she could not see his face. She herself was nervously agitated. Her heart was throbbing wildly, and her brow was burning.

'What wouldst thou have to guide thee?' he asked at last. 'This much I can tell thee: the lady is as gentle as a dove, and not scornful, but very pitiful, and of a sweetness that passeth words.'

'Surely a paragon,' Adrienne remarked.

'Surely a paragon,' he echoed; 'and now that thou hast this knowledge, tell me if I should proclaim my love to her.'

'The honest love of an honest man ought not to beget a woman's scorn, even though she could not accept it,' Adrienne answered prevaricatingly.

'Thou dost but trifle with me,' he answered in a tone of disappointment.

'No, an I hope for mercy,' she said quickly, 'but I know not what else to say to thee.'

'Tell me if it would be an act of too daring presumption to make my love known,' he cried yearningly.

'She might at least forgive thee, an she be all thou hast described,' replied Adrienne, still prevaricating.

'She might—she might,' said Basile, as if to himself; 'she might not smite me with the anger of her eyes, nor yet call

aloud for a champion to pour out my plebeian blood. Those things she would not do, I am sure, because she is very gentle. But for evermore she might scorn me, and infinitely rather would I have her openly-expressed hate than her silent scorn, for that would be unbearable. Love that is scorned becomes a fiery madness.'

'Since thou art in such desperate straits,' said Adrienne, wishing to bring the conference to a climax, 'it were, perhaps, better that thou shouldst declare thy love, and leave the rest to chance.'

The next moment she was aware that he was on his knees at her feet, and she felt his warm breath on her hand as he seized it and pressed it to his lips. Her head was in a whirl with confusion, and her heart seemed to leap into her mouth. Then she heard, as one might hear in a dream, these passionate words :

'Slay me, an thou wilt, for willingly would I die by thy hands. To live without thee longer were to live a life of torture. Therefore it were better—a thousand times better—that I were dead. Listen to me. I, Basile the Jester, Basile the buffoon, Basile the fool, love thee, love thee—Adrienne de Bois.'

CHAPTER XV.

HUSBAND AND WIFE—KING AND QUEEN.

MARY QUEEN OF SCOTS returned from her personally conducted campaign flushed with victory, for she had thoroughly routed her brother, the Earl of Murray, who had fled for protection into England. But though thus far she had triumphed, her path was beset with thorns, her life was full of difficulty. The kingdom was torn with internal dissension, and the stern, uncompromising bigot Knox was fomenting deep hatred against those who professed adherence to the Romish Church. The light of the Reformation was dawning over the land, but those who took upon themselves to herald it were sullyng the justness of their cause, and mocking the holiness of the doctrine they proclaimed, by mercilessness, uncharitableness, and fierce cruelty.

All classes of society had their traitorous zealots, who in the name of God were ready to denounce their dearest friends, if those friends chose to hold different theological views from

their own. In the palace itself treason, like an insidious serpent, made its slimy way, and nobody knew the moment that it might raise its head and strike. Protestant Elizabeth of England was intriguing against Catholic Mary of Scotland, and the air was thick with disquieting rumours, while trade languished and the progress of civilization was for the time being blocked. If Mary at this time, and in the hour of her victory, had been magnanimous, and had pardoned her enemies, she might have won their ultimate regard and insured their fidelity. In particular should she have been so with her brother, for he had met with humiliation, insult, and rebuff at the English Court, and he would gladly have accepted pardon at his sister's hands; for he sued for it humbly through her favourite David Rizzio. But her passion was too strong to allow her to be politic, and she determined to have her brother condemned by her own Parliament as a traitor. Though she had traitors nearer to her whom it would have been well for her had she routed out.

Her handsome favourite Rizzio was as an apple of discord in her Court. This young Italian was an agent of the Pope, and he was bitterly opposed to the Protestant party. But what was of even more consequence was the jealousy he begot in the Queen's husband, Lord Darnley. This jealousy was destined to soon lead to an open rupture; and one day, when Darnley had clouded his brain with the fumes of wine, he forced himself into the presence of his royal wife.

'Madame,' he exclaimed, 'I come to claim my rights. Thou hast made me but as a puppet in thy kingdom, and now I demand that thou place upon me the crown matrimonial, so that I may share with thee the government of this realm.'

'Demand!' exclaimed the Queen haughtily, and with an imperious toss of her beautiful head. 'I respect no demands from my inferiors. Thy insolence shall not go unpunished. In the meantime it would be well for thee to learn how to treat thy wife with the respect that is due to her, and also to learn loyalty to thy Queen, lest we suspect thee of treachery.'

'Think not, madame, that by this display of temper thou canst put me from my rights. Thou hast allowed that villain David Rizzio to dishonour me, and it were well for thy peace and mine that thou shouldst dismiss him.'

'That will I not,' cried the Queen passionately; 'thy accusations are false, thy insinuations disgraceful. Rizzio is a

very honest gentleman, full of loyalty to me, and ready to defend my honour with his life.'

'Thy honour!' sneered Darnley; 'an thou wouldst protect that from calumny, thou must choose a defender who holds it less lightly than this dog Rizzio.'

Livid with passion, Darnley strode out of the Queen's apartment, and then, giving way to her feelings, Mary sank down and wept bitterly. Soon the door of an anteroom opened, and Adrienne de Bois entered hurriedly, and threw herself at her royal mistress's feet.

'Wherefore these tears, sweet Queen?' she said soothingly, as she toyed with Mary's luxuriant hair. 'Nay, your Majesty, let not grief shake thee thus. Tears do but mar thy Grace's beauty. Wherefore art thou so unhappy?'

'Alas! good Adrienne, I am sorely hurt here,' indicating her heart. 'My Lord Darnley has insulted me; nay, had I been his strumpet instead of his Queen, his language could not have been more violent.'

'Let it not trouble thee,' Adrienne said. 'Your Majesty's honour and virtue cannot be assailed. Come, let me dry those tears. Tears suit thee not. Thou shouldst be all smiles.'

'Ay, should be!' moaned the Queen; 'but enemies surround me; intrigue is at work, and there are traitors everywhere.'

'But thou hast friends also, true and loyal and stanch,' urged Adrienne, as she wiped the Queen's face and smoothed back her hair from her forehead.

'Thou art one of them, sweet Adrienne,' said the Queen, as she kissed her companion, and then, rising, allowed herself to be led to a seat. Suddenly sinking her voice, and with her arm round the neck of Adrienne and her cheek pressed to hers, she asked: 'Dost thou think that danger threatens Rizzio?'

'Danger, your Majesty—danger of what?'

'Nay, I scarcely know,' replied the Queen. 'Methinks I am growing nervous and unnecessarily apprehensive; but thou knowest, sweet, that they hate David.'

'By my faith, your Majesty, that is news to me,' Adrienne said, not wishing to make the Queen uneasy.

'Tut!' said the Queen a little sharply; 'perjure not thyself. Thou knowest well it is so. There, I am better now,' she

continued, as she rose and smoothed the folds of her collar. 'I thank thee for thy consolation; but I would be alone. Leave me, good Adrienne. Stay, in half an hour send thy foster son François to me here. I would have speech with him.'

'I will, your Majesty,' Adrienne replied as, making a low bow, she withdrew.

CHAPTER XVI.

HER MAJESTY GIVES A PLEDGE.

IN obedience to the Queen's commands, François duly presented himself in her Majesty's apartment.

He was a tall, strikingly handsome youth, with the limbs of an Apollo. He had a mass of soft, silken, brown hair that clustered in a tangle of curls about his shapely head. The face was perfect; the skin, fair almost as a girl's, was delicately tinted with the ruddy hue of health. His eyes were quick, keen, piercing, and dark, and his straight-cut nostrils indicated decision of character. His age, judging from his looks, might have been anything from seventeen to twenty-five. Sometimes, when a characteristic smile rippled over his handsome face, he appeared a mere boy, but when this gave way to an equally characteristic frown of determination he was a man.

He was handsomely dressed in velvet shoes, lavender-coloured hose without trunks, and a tightly-fitting tunic of dark-red material, trimmed with amber braid, and vandyked in the skirt, which did not quite reach to his knees. Round his waist was a costly and handsome girdle, from which depended a small dagger with an ivory handle inlaid with gold. The girdle was velvet, elaborately worked with real thread of gold. The sleeves of his tunic came down to his wrists, and were relieved by a small trimming of lace.

He bowed very low as he entered, and the Queen could not help gazing on him with admiration, for he was a picture of lusty health and perfect symmetry, and no more handsome youth, even in that age celebrated for handsome men, could have been found in all Scotland.

'François, thou lovest me,' the Queen said, as she stretched forth her hand, which he touched gracefully with his lips as he knelt on one knee before her.

'Your Majesty knows full well I do,' he answered in a voice that was clear and sweet as a bell.

'I think thou dost,' the Queen returned, as withdrawing her hand she seated herself, while he continued to kneel.

'I crave your Grace to say that you are sure,' François replied.

'Rise,' she said, without heeding his remark. As he obeyed her command and stood before her, she noticed his handsome girdle and dagger, and exclaimed in surprise: 'God's truth, boy, but thou hast a costly belt and poniard. Unless my wit's at fault, I dare be sworn they are a love-gift. I see in fancy the white fingers of some love-sick girl broidering those cunning curves of gold. Beshrew me, but thou art blushing, and that scarlet in thy cheek tells its own tale. Whose fingers were they that wrought thy girdle, François? Nay, man, do not grow so confused. An thy love be well placed, thou canst count upon my favour. But have a care, François. Women are dangerous cattle, and thou art young. And for thy misfortune, God has given thee a handsome face. Beware, lest the siren voice of flattery lead thee into dangerous paths. And, François, an thou wouldst be advised by me, let no woman steal thy young heart. Thou hast plenty of years before thee yet, and can afford to wait. But when did the hot blood of youth stay to the voice of reason? Youth must have its fling, so I'll let thee go thy way. But I am curious, François, to know the name of her who has won thy smiles. Is she dark or fair?'

François was betrayed by this question. He had been much confused by her Majesty's playful remarks, and he had strong reasons for withholding the information; but that question led him into a trap, and he said:

'She is dark, an it please your Majesty.'

'Oh, oh!' cried the Queen; 'then I guess aright, and thou art in love.'

'Alas! your Majesty, it is so,' François murmured bashfully, as he once more knelt before the Queen, and bowed his head so that she might not see his scarlet face.

'Alas!' exclaimed the Queen, with a laugh, 'Is that the word thou usest. And then thy sighs, too. Alack and aday, but thou must have the disease badly.'

'An it please your Majesty,' said François, 'I would humbly crave your Grace not to make light of my very sincere passion.'

‘But it doesn’t please our Majesty,’ answered the Queen good-humouredly, and evidently enjoying the situation very much. ‘And so thou really believest thou art in love. Oh, by my faith, but this is humorous.’ Hast ever heard of calf-love, boy?’

‘An it please your Majesty, I knew not that calves loved,’ mumbled François, as he played nervously with the tabs of his tunic, and altogether felt very uncomfortable.

‘Go to, thou silly oaf!’ cried the Queen. ‘Thou art a calf, and thou art in love. Therefore thou hast calf-love. It is a bad disease, but doesn’t last long. Thou wilt recover soon. Why, thy beard is not yet grown, and until men have beards, they know not how to love.’

‘Nay, an it please you——’

‘Tut, silly boy!’ said the Queen, interrupting him; ‘what canst thou know of the tender passion?’

‘As yet not much, I own,’ answered François, feeling impelled to defend himself from the Queen’s badinage; ‘but the little experience I have gained teaches me that it is very good.’

‘Very good indeed,’ replied the Queen. ‘A sugar pasty and a conserve with it were better. Thou must cut thy wisdom-teeth before drinking of love. But, come, let us know what goose it is that has made such a gander of thee.’

François was excessively annoyed, but he dare not give the slightest sign of his annoyance, and he was also troubled and uneasy in his mind, for he had reason to know that the lady upon whom he had fixed his affections would not find favour in the Queen’s sight. He bitterly regretted now that he had been so silly as to display his fancy belt and toy dagger, for to them he owed his predicament. But it is seldom the vanity of youth is curbed by caution; and in François’s case it had led him into an unpleasant position.

He had learnt too much of the courtier’s duties not to know that it would be dangerous to flatly refuse her Majesty’s request. But he tried to avoid answering her by a little finessing, and so he said:

‘Since your Majesty is pleased to think me too young to have a serious love-affair, I would very humbly crave permission to be allowed to keep secret the name of the lady in order that she may be spared the ridicule which this very silly matter seems likely to raise.’

The Queen was astonished, but not displeased with this answer, and she said :

‘By the rood, but thou hast the makings of an ambassador in thee. I give thee credit also for thy chivalry; but I am a woman, and therefore curious, and so I wish to know thy lady-love.’

‘But your Majesty——’

‘But, sirrah, there are no buts in it,’ interrupted the Queen, speaking with some severity. ‘An thou wouldst avoid our displeasure, *but* me not, but answer the question.’

François was greatly distressed as he saw that he must comply. And so he said tremulously :

‘The lady’s name, your Majesty, is Lilian Bomcester.’

‘Bomcester—Bomcester,’ mused the Queen. ‘Dost mean the daughter of the mercer?’

‘The same, your Majesty.’

At this announcement the Queen’s manner wholly changed. The humorous, pleasant expression of her face gave place to passionate anger. Her nostrils dilated and her eyes flashed, while the workings of her mouth told that she was greatly excited and agitated.

‘François,’ she cried almost fiercely, ‘an thou wert not an inexperienced and foolish youth, thou shouldst hang like a dog. Rise, sirrah.’ Up to this time he had knelt on one knee before the Queen, but now at her stern command he rose and stood with bowed head and abashed mien before her. ‘Knowest thou not that Bomcester is a bitter and relentless foe to us? He is a blind and fanatical worshipper of the loud-mouthed heretic Knox; and even our royal person would not be safe from his madness an he had power to work his dangerous will. Speak, sirrah; hadst thou not this knowledge?’

‘In very truth no, your Majesty,’ answered François, looking at the Queen fearlessly now. ‘Though I have heard that Bomcester walked in the new faith, and was therefore distasteful to your Majesty.’

‘And knowing this, thou hast dared to hold communication with his daughter.’

‘I have, your Majesty; but her beauty enthralled me.

His frank confession seemed to please the Queen, whose manner softened.

‘Come hither,’ she said, and as he approached she laid her

hand on his head and peered fixedly into his face, and he met her gaze without flinching. 'François, thou art honest.'

'I fain would hope so, your Majesty.'

'And full of loyalty to us.'

'As I hope for mercy in heaven, yes.'

She took her hand away, and said :

'Thou art a brave youth, and I forgive thee thy folly. But listen, François. If thou hold'st further communication with that daughter of the devil, thou wilt be guilty of treason, and though thou wert twenty times more precious to us than thou art—nay, an thou wert our own son—our relentless vengeance should fall on thee. Look to it, boy, for it were better thou hadst never been born than to incur our wrath. Take off that gewgaw'—pointing to his belt—'and never offend my eyes again with it.'

François hurriedly unclasped the girdle, and, crushing it up in his hand, he said with passionate earnestness :

'Your Majesty, doubt me not. I am your Majesty's loyal, humble, and loving servant, and nothing on earth shall warp my allegiance.'

The Queen was greatly pleased, and, commanding him to rise, said :

'Brave child, thy loyalty and love shall find their reward. Look in my face. Thou hast good eyes, keep them open ; and thy ears, let them never be closed, for there are traitors in our Court, and we need such as thee to spy them out. Dost understand ?'

'I do, your Majesty.'

'Good. Weigh well our words. Be honest, true, and faithful, and there is a great future before thee. Thou mayst go now. Stay—come here !' She took his head between her hands, and touched lightly with her lips his upturned forehead. 'Thy Queen salutes thee,' she said. 'Let that kiss be as a solemn pledge that thy loyalty shall be richly paid for. Pledge me in return that thy fidelity is a thing beyond price.'

She inclined her face towards him. He understood her meaning, and he kissed her on the lips. Then, in obedience to her command, he left her. When the door had closed behind him, the Queen muttered to herself :

'That is a noble youth, and will serve us loyally. It is well to have such trusted servitors near our person in these traitorous times.'

CHAPTER XVII.

IT WAS EVER THUS.

As François left the Queen's apartment, his head was in a whirl with ambitious dreams, begotten by her Majesty's promises, and the honour she had done him in kissing him, and allowing him to kiss her in return. She could hardly have given any more decided sign of her esteem, regard, and trust, and he burned with pride as he thought of it.

So excited and elated was he that he hurried to his chamber in order that he might be alone and give full vent to his fancy and his feelings. On the hearthstone burned a log, and with a gesture of contempt he hurled his girdle and the dagger on to the fire, exclaiming as he did so :

‘I have been a fool, but am so no longer. Lilian Bomcester has wealth and beauty ; but neither her beauty nor her wealth shall tempt me. My duty is to my Queen, and for her I will give my heart's blood. I will be faithful to her unto death.’

Every word and sentiment he uttered was the genuine outcome of his feelings at that moment ; and had he there and then been called upon to defend her Majesty, he would, like a lion at bay, have faced any odds. The royal kiss had fired his blood and filled him with enthusiasm, and his romantic nature made him yearn to do deeds of renown in the Queen's cause.

‘Dear Queen,’ he thought, ‘my love, my undying devotion, my every act and deed, are thine, and for thee.’

In imagination, he peered into the future, and he saw himself, as the Queen's favourite, enjoying honours and high office. He thrilled with pleasurable emotion, and prayed in his heart that ere long the chance might be afforded him of proving, by gallant deeds, how devoted and true he was to her Majesty.

He turned toward the fire, and he saw that the beautiful girdle had been consumed to ashes ; and the pretty dagger was burnt out of all recognition of its former self.

‘Thus dissolves my silly dream and ends my escapade,’ he murmured.

In giving utterance to this thought, he believed—firmly believed—it was the absolute truth. But very soon he had to recognise that by the burning of his costly love-gift he had

not cast out Lilian's image from his brain. She haunted him, though he tried hard not to think of her; but his efforts were all of no avail, for with his eyes shut, or his eyes open he saw her sweet face, turn which way he would. When later on he pressed his couch, sleep came not to him, and his chamber seemed to be filled with a subtle presence which his restless brain fashioned into Lilian, and he began to think to himself that it was hard that unkind circumstances compelled him to give up Lilian, whose beauty was a theme of admiration throughout the town, and who was unanimously voted the Belle of Edinburgh.

There were young men who would almost have sold their immortal souls to have possessed her; and yet he, the favoured one, he, who had been privileged to whisper sweet love words into her ear, and to receive in return the warm kisses of her exquisite lips, must give her up—must come to know in time that the nectar which he had sipped with ravishing delight was being enjoyed by another, and that her beauty and her wealth were lost to him. It was a bitter and trying reflection for a romantic youth, and it put his loyalty to a very severe test.

It was the Queen or Lilian he had to choose between. He must give up one or the other. Bomcester, as he knew, was the Queen's enemy, and therefore to love the daughter of the enemy of the Queen was to be guilty of faithlessness to the Queen, who could give him power and greatness.

His duty was to her Majesty, and he fully recognised that; but love is a powerful factor in the calculations of youth, and his boyish heart went out towards the beautiful Lilian.

With conflicting emotions of this kind racking him, he tossed for hours, restless and sleepless, until at last he believed that he had triumphed over his heart, that he had steeled it against Lilian. Henceforth he would be adamant, upon which it would be impossible for her tender glances to make impression; and his ears should be perfectly deaf to her sighs, let her sigh never so pitifully. He rose with the sun, and arranged his wealth of curly hair, and gazed on his handsome face and form with boyish vanity. But he firmly believed now that his loyalty was a fixed quantity, and that nothing could change it. 'I am the Queen's favourite,' he thought, 'and I will serve her to the death.'

A little later he went to the lodgings of his supposed father.

'Thou hast a tired look this morning, François, as though thy rest had been broken,' said Renaud.

'I slept not well, sir,' François answered.

'I hear from Mademoiselle Adrienne that the Queen gave thee an audience yester-eve,' Renaud observed, as he searched François' face. 'Mayhap her Majesty is responsible for thy lack of sleep.'

'In truth, that is so, sir.'

'Why, and how? Sit thee down, boy, and tell me what said the Queen, that thou shouldst be so affected.'

'It came about, sir, that her Majesty learned from me that I have had love passages with Lilian Bomcester.'

'Ah!' exclaimed Renaud eagerly, and with a display of anxiety; 'and what said her Majesty?'

'She was exceedingly angered.'

'As well she might be,' observed Renaud thoughtfully. 'But wherefore wert thou such a fool as to let her Majesty know?'

'Alas! sir, she drew it from me.'

'Foolish youth! Thou hast undone thyself,' Renaud said bitterly.

'No, in truth, sir, for I have vowed fidelity to the Queen.'

'But thou must abandon Lilian,' Renaud cried quickly.

'Ay, sir, that is my duty.'

'Tut, boy! Thy duty, forsooth! Thy first duty is to thyself,' said Renaud, with an expression of disgust.

François looked very troubled, and he began to struggle with himself again.

'Do you counsel me, sir, to be false to the Queen?' he asked in distress.

'False—no. But thou art taking too serious a view of the case. Thou knowest well that I brought thee in contact with Lilian Bomcester, wishing thee to possess her for the sake of her wealth. I have fostered her regard for thee and thine for her; and now thou hast allowed thy silly tongue to betray thee.'

'You forget, sir, I am a servant of the Queen.'

'I forget nothing, boy,' said Renaud angrily; 'but dost thou for a moment dream that her Majesty will go out of her way to serve *thee*? Thou art far too humble and unimportant for her to specially remember thee amongst the crowds of sycophants who surround her. Look to thyself! The making

of thy future is in thine own hands. Lilian will bring thee wealth, and wealth is power. Besides, I am hopeful of being able to reconcile her Majesty to Boncaster. He is a friend of mine, and I would wish my friends to be in the Queen's favour. I am a loyal servant of her Majesty, and I work to serve her, and I cannot better serve her than by bringing her rebellious subjects to see the error of their way. Could anything tend more surely to bring Boncaster over to our side than thy union with his daughter?'

François was quite carried away by the sophistry of this argument, and his good resolutions of the previous night were shaken to pieces.

If his father, as he believed him to be, advised him thus, was it not better, if not an absolute duty, that he should profit by that advice and follow it? It is true that on the previous night he had pledged himself to loyal fidelity, and had had the honour of sealing that pledge on her Majesty's lips; but was not Lilian beautiful, and was it not possible that through Lilian he might bring her father, who was a powerful and influential citizen, over to the Queen's camp? Therefore, would it not be an immense gain if he succeeded in doing that?

It was a struggle in his mind between Queen and love. For which should he declare?

'Perhaps you are right, sire,' he said, 'and yet her Majesty exacted from me a solemn pledge to be faithful to her. Should I not violate that pledge if I do that which I know to be contrary to her wishes?'

'I fail to see that thou wouldst be guilty of any violation in endeavouring to gain for her the allegiance of one who has fallen away. Her Majesty takes strange and unjustifiable prejudices, and she often imposes very grinding duties on those who love her most.'

'But Boncaster is implacable,' cried out François in his distress, for his mind was once more racked with conflicting thoughts.

'Implacable!' echoed Renaud, with a sneer: 'and what of that? Is Lilian implacable? If her heart is thine, dost thou not think thou canst mould it to thy wishes? An thou canst not, then art thou unfit to have a wife. Assuming that Lilian were thy wife, wouldst thou not have a powerful lever to use against her father? But, an he refused to be reconciled, thy wife would follow thee and be as loyal

as thou art. And thou wouldst have gained besides—a fortune. For, an rumour speaks true, there is no wealthier citizen in all Edinburgh than Bomcester, and half his wealth is irrevocably settled on his daughter.

If François had been older and more experienced, it is probable that Renaud would have had to advance more cogent reasons than he had done before he had succeeded in shaking François's fidelity to the Queen. But, as it was now, every word told on the youth, and he argued with himself as youth ever argues, that it was very hard and very unfair that he, being in love with a young woman, should not be allowed to follow the bent of his own inclinations in the matter. This, of course, was fallacious reasoning, but a young man is generally fallacious in matters of early love.

Of course François tried to find all sorts of excuses for breaking away from his pledge. 'Lilian is beautiful,' he thought, 'and Lilian is rich; and, then, she has never expressed any feeling against the Queen; and being a woman, and so gentle and loving, how could *she* bear hatred and animosity?'

It will thus be seen what a conflict he waged with himself, and the distress it caused him may be inferred from his exclamation:

'Sir, I am so troubled that I wish I were far away from here, or else lying dead.'

Renaud broke into a mocking laugh, and answered:

'Shame on thee, boy! Art thou a coward?'

'No, by heaven and earth!'

'Why then utter such a coward's wish? True love brooks no interference. Win thy lady and fortune first, and then serve thy Queen.'

'But surely, sire, you do not counsel me to openly rebel against her Majesty's commands?' François asked, with a puzzled look on his handsome face.

'Poor boy!' said Renaud, with contempt; 'hast thou lived in a palace all these years only to ask such a foolish question as that? An thou set value on thy place and life, thou must conduct thy affairs in secrecy. Let not thy right hand know what thy left doeth. Go thy ways in stealth; and let thy goings out and comings in be shrouded in mystery. Woo thy lady-love in secret, and marry her in secret, and breathe no syllable of thy business to thy dearest friends, not even to her who has been a mother to thee.'

‘*And this, sir, is your advice ?*’ François asked.

‘*It is. Go thy ways. Be secret and silent as death, and fortune and success will attend thee.*’

‘*I will follow your advice, sir,*’ the youth said, standing before Renaud with downcast eyes, as though conscience somehow was pricking him. It certainly did tell him that his decision must be for love or Queen ; and he answered it and declared for love, little recking of the danger into which that was to lead him.

When he had gone, Renaud smiled, and, rubbing his white hands about each other with a movement of self-gratification, he said to himself :

‘*Adrienne de Bois, I shall conquer thee yet.*’

CHAPTER XVIII.

‘BE SILENT, CAUTIOUS, WATCHFUL.’

BASILE the Jester’s confession of love did not altogether surprise Adrienne de Bois. She would have been very stupid and very obtuse indeed had she failed to notice how for a long time he had regarded her with silent admiration, how by a hundred ways and signs he had proclaimed that she was dear to him. But, still, though she knew this, she was scarcely prepared for the open acknowledgment of his passion, and she was conscious that she was in a predicament. She was puzzled how to act. She did not feel angry with him, but she did feel that between him and her was a gulf. Could she bridge it ?

In a sort of mental bird’s-eye view she took in all the course of her life from its earliest years, and she saw how her hopes and aspirations had been unrealized. She had, it is true, been born to high estate, and had lived amidst wealth and pomp ; but in most human natures, and especially in a woman’s nature, there is a yearning for something else. To be a mere puppet amongst the living, and to fill a nameless part in the stirring drama of life, is what few women of spirit care for. Adrienne’s childhood had been happy enough, and, in fact, up to the time of Mary Stuart’s marriage she had never known what it was to have the suspicion of a shadow fall over the bright path of her existence. But soon after that event she came gradually to realize that the close companionship that had

erstwhile existed between her and the Dauphiness could not of necessity exist any longer. With her marriage Mary's sphere was enlarged, and new sympathies, new attachments, new duties, demanded her attention, so that old friends and old lovers were to a considerable extent crowded into the background. And it was in the light of this dawning knowledge that Adrienne de Bois began to perceive that she stood very much alone. Her fortune at that time was only small, totally insufficient in the absence of physical beauty to attract suitors. Now, she was fully aware that she had nothing to recommend her to the notice of men, and so when she obtained the charge of the child François she felt somewhat compensated, and when, a little later still, the supposed father of the boy asked her for her love, she was flattered and pleased, and there is little doubt that she would have become Renaud's wife had it not been for the mysterious warning, so mysteriously conveyed.

Years had passed since then, and Renaud had risen from obscurity to power, and, with the coward's nature, he had resented her refusal of him by a long series of petty acts of tyranny and annoyance, which had absolutely made her life burdensome, whilst she was utterly without means of redress or retaliation.

Those years had not, of course, increased her beauty, though they had increased her worldly wealth owing to the death of relations, and a knowledge of this had undoubtedly induced Renaud to constantly urge her to marry him; but, with strange inconsistency, he tyrannized over her as the only means he had of resenting the disappointment her repeated refusals caused him, and this meanness served to turn any love she might ever have possessed for him into positive dislike, if not into hatred.

She was aware, too, for her mirror told her—how could it do otherwise?—that the years had most unmistakably left their stamp upon her. The freshness of youth had faded, and the plainness of her face had become more accentuated. So that she quite made up her mind that her life must be lonely, for even the boy she had loved was passing into manhood, and so into a new sphere, which would necessarily separate her from him.

It was the consideration and ever-present knowledge of these facts which enabled her to receive Basile's confession

with complacency, if not with positive pleasure. To become his wife would certainly involve the forfeiture of her position, as a *mésalliance* of that kind would not find favour with Queen Mary or her Court. But the thought naturally suggested itself to Adrienne, Why should she sacrifice substance for shadow? She had ample means. She was free to do as she liked; and if she chose to make a descent in the social scale in order to acquire the happiness which in the higher sphere she could never hope to gain, that was an affair in which she had a right to demand untrammelled action.

‘Art thou sincere?’ she had said to Basile when she could trust herself to speak, after his confession.

‘Sincere!’ he exclaimed. ‘Ah, Mademoiselle Adrienne, if sincerity is to feel that for thee I could die at thy feet, an it would benefit thee, then in faith am I sincere.’

‘And how long hast thou had this feeling?’ she asked.

‘For many years,’ he said.

‘And why hast thou remained so long silent?’

‘Because thou hast been so far removed from me; and when I have been tempted to go out towards thee, my heart has failed me, failed me lest thou shouldst spurn me, and I felt it were better to love in silence, better to yearn with hope in my heart, than to end suspense by certainty and have my heart broken.’

‘Tell me,’ she said, as new light began to dawn upon her—‘tell me, Basile, hadst thou this admiration for me before Renaud came to the Court in France?’

‘Ay, by all that’s holy.’

‘And thou wert aware that he was paying attention to me?’

‘Yes.’

‘How didst thou know that?’ she asked quickly.

‘By watching thy every movement and his: Jealousy hath a hundred eyes, and interprets signs that others see not.’

‘Well,’ she said, as he paused, ‘thou hast not told me all.’

‘What else can I tell?’

‘Nay, Basile, I am not the keeper of thy thoughts; and yet I dare be sworn thou hast left something unsaid.’

In speaking thus she was but probing him, for she suspected that he it was who had given her the mysterious warning not to marry Renaud.

‘I have left something unsaid,’ he answered. ‘I knew

Renaud to be an impostor. I knew that he was aiming to possess thee. That in itself was enough for me to hate him. But once he struck me, and then I vowed to myself that I would *thwart him at every turn.* 'The night that he asked thee to become his wife I heard him, for I had dogged his footsteps, and stood in the room when he passed through it. I heard thy answer to him, and, fearful that thou wouldst accept him, I placed in thy chamber a dagger with a warning attached.'

'Ah! I thought so,' exclaimed Adrienne.

'Dost thou hate me for it?' he asked pleadingly.

'No; thou didst me a service. But thou hast said that Renaud is an impostor. What dost thou mean by that?'

'The time is not ripe yet when I may tell thee; but tell thee I will at no distant day.'

'And wherefore not now?'

'It cannot be, it cannot be; my own safety would be perilled,' he murmured.

'An that be so I will not press thee,' she answered sympathetically. Then there was silence between them for some minutes, until he broke it by saying:

'Dost thou detest me for what I have said and done?'

'No.'

'And thou wilt give me hope?' he cried eagerly, encouraged by her words.

'Be silent, cautious, watchful,' she said, almost solemnly; 'and then thou needst not despair. But remember neither by word nor sign must thou display thy feeling for me to others.'

'I will not, I will not!' he cried, thrilled to delight by her words, and the next moment he had seized her hand and pressed it to his lips. She gently withdrew it, and, murmuring 'Adieu,' hurried away.

CHAPTER XIX.

HO! FOR LILIAN.

ANTHONY BOMCESTER was a mercer in the High Street, Edinburgh. He was reputed to be the wealthiest, or at any rate one of the wealthiest citizens in Edinburgh. He did not by any means, however, live in accordance with this reputation, for his habits were sordid, his mode of life squalid, his nature miserly. Anthony had been a widower for many

years; and when his wife died he took, as his housekeeper, his own sister, Julia Bomcester, a hard-featured, sour-grained, unhappy-looking woman, who always carried a Bible under her arm, and ceaselessly talked of the eternal damnation of all men.

Anthony Bomcester was a big, raw-boned, broad-chested, slouching man, with long arms that swung like pendulums; with big hands and great knuckle-joints, the spaces between the knuckles covered with fibrous hair. His feet were broad and spreading, the general build of his body angular and unwieldy. His head was large and matted over with iron-gray hair of coarse texture. His face was knotted and gnarled, with a sour, hard expression. His eyes were gray, deep-set, and overhung with coarse bushy brows. His nose and mouth were large; and a long reddish beard, turning gray, completes the portrait of as objectionable a looking man as one could imagine. His costume was usually as severe as himself—plain leather shoes with steel buckles, sombre gray hose with trunks, and a black velvet jacket with cloak of the same hue.

Anthony was a conspicuous figure; nearly everyone in the town knew him; and by a certain force of character he had made himself a prominent actor in that stirring era. When the uncompromising and merciless reformer, John Knox, arrived from Geneva, Bomcester became one of his most fanatical followers, and avowed himself the deadly enemy of everyone professing Catholicism. To the Queen he had displayed the utmost aversion, and had been in the habit of applying such strong language to her and the Court, and of openly uttering threats of so dastardly a nature, that he had been cited for high treason, but the influence of Knox and his party had prevented his being brought to trial.

It was strange that such a man should have been the father of a child who was the exact antipodes of himself and character. Yet such was the case; but Lilian took after her mother, who had been equally remarkable for her beauty and a sweet disposition. Rumour said that she had gone to an early grave owing to the austerity and severe régime of her flinty husband. Lilian, who was about eighteen years of age, was of that type of beauty sufficiently rare to render her conspicuous. She was dark, with white teeth, a clear, transparent complexion, and dark blue eyes. Her face and figure were

classical in their mould, and her carriage was grace itself. Many indeed were the love-sighs drawn for, and many the longing glances that were directed towards, the old mercer's handsome daughter. Youths quarrelled and went mad about her, and older men vowed that Heaven had never before made so beautiful a woman. She had been brought up partly by her aunt, whose sourness of disposition had never been able to affect in the slightest degree the sweetness of Lilian. The girl was a dutiful and obedient daughter, and she possessed considerable influence over her father at times; but it is doubtful whether the sombreness with which she was surrounded, and the rigid ascetic mode of living that was imposed upon her, did not render her position irksome and unbearable. Both her father and her ogress-like aunt watched her with keenly jealous eyes, and she was allowed no liberty of action, and scarcely freedom of thought. At all events, they tried to warp her judgment and mould her mind to their own gloomy views; but so far they had not succeeded in changing the innate goodness of her heart. Possessed of rare intelligence and a discriminating judgment, she did not readily yield to influences that were directed against her charitably-disposed feelings. She had embraced the new doctrines; but, unlike her father, she did not consider that those people who remained staunch to the ancient faith were fiends incarnate.

A year before the time we are now writing about, Lilian became acquainted with François, the supposed son of Renaud, and it came about in this way: John Knox had been commanded on two or three occasions to Holyrood by the Queen, and it chanced that on one of these occasions he had come in contact with Renaud, who, for motives that could scarcely have been other than those of self-interest, showed some inclination to become a disciple of the Reformer. Knox, thinking that Renaud might be useful, introduced him to Bomcester, and Renaud speedily saw that, if he could only bring about a match between the beautiful Lilian and François, he himself might get some of the riches which report said Lilian would ultimately possess. Full of this idea, he set himself to work with cunning intrigue, in the art of which he had shown himself an adept. He succeeded in bringing François and Lilian together, feeling sure that each other's youth and each other's beauty would do the rest.

Bomcester, with that perception which distinguished him,

saw instantly how he might advance the interests of his own fanatical party by using François as an instrument. François was youthful, impressionable, and capable of being easily led by so beautiful a maiden as Lilian. When the connection first began, Bomcester had no serious intention of allowing his daughter to become engaged to François. His idea was simply to use Lilian as a means of causing the youth to become false to his allegiance to the Queen, and to use him as a spy.

It was a discreditable motive this, but Bomcester did not think so. His fanaticism blinded him, and he believed that he was perfectly justified in resorting to any means to overcome those whose creed differed from his own.

As was only natural, however, the boy and girl were not long before they were over head and ears in love with each other. Lilian's father was not altogether displeased with this, for he considered that he was only the more certain to secure François to his own followers. In the madness of his love the boy would be willing to lend himself to anything, to become an easy and pliable tool in the hands of his designing and crafty teacher. And herein Bomcester was not altogether wrong, for François was young and inexperienced ; he loved Lilian ; she encouraged his love, that is, she loved him in return, although she knew that her father would under no circumstances sanction her wedding him until he had become an uncompromising and unswerving convert to the new religion. François loved his Queen as a subject, dutiful and loyal, may love his ruler. But he loved Lilian as a man may love a beautiful woman, and the passion of such a love has from time immemorial been strong enough to cause men to renounce their sovereign, betray their country, and prove traitorous even to their dearest friends. The youth himself knew perfectly well that he must choose one of two courses : either to follow in the path of duty and loyalty to her Majesty, or, becoming a traitor, bask in the smiles of the favour of Lilian. Which should it be ?

After that interview with the Queen he decided for her, as was shown by his destroying the beautiful love-gift of the girdle and dagger ; but, then, subsequently, Renaud's influence prevailed, and so his resolutions were flung to the winds, and in his heart he cried, ' Ho ! for Lilian.'

CHAPTER XX.

LOVE'S POWER

It is a blustery night, and the wind sweeping down from the hills shrieks through the narrow streets of Edinburgh, and howls through the wynds and courts as if it were a ravening beast seeking for prey. Overhead the flying scud tears along, now in rolling masses, and anon in wide-spreading fields or in ragged streamers. And through the rents and rifts peers a young moon, that calls into being strange shadows that swirl and toss about the town like things of life. Sometimes the streets are plunged in total darkness, and at others they are filled with cold, weird light, that brings into picturesque relief the old houses, with their quaint gables, their hanging eaves, and their projecting windows.

Leaving the Palace of Holyrood stealthily, a man enveloped in a large cloak, with his face hidden by a slouching hat, steals through the private garden, and avoiding the sentries posted at the various entrances, he makes his way familiarly through the shrubbery, until he reaches the boundary wall. There he pauses and listens. He hears nothing, however, but the screeching wind as it shakes the trees into angry protest; and the tramp of the guard, mingled with the rattle of steel corselets, as the men move about over their allotted space.

The cloaked man presently climbs the wall, aided by a log of wood placed endways, and which was evidently there for the purpose. He gains the top of the wall, listens again; then, taking advantage of a howling gust and temporary darkness, caused by masses of clouds sweeping over the face of the moon, he drops lightly down on the other side, and speeds away as if he himself were a shadow. With evident familiarity he hurries up the steep and tortuous street, until nearly opposite the cross in the High Street. There he turns down a wynd that is steeped in inky darkness, but he gropes along by the wall until he reaches a doorway at the foot of a wooden stair. Up this he goes, gains a gallery overhanging a yard, and then knocks on a ponderous door, first with two sharp raps, then one rap, followed after a pause by two sharp raps again. It is beyond doubt a prearranged signal. A small barred wicket in the centre of the door slides back, but no light reveals anything, though a gruff voice says :

'A faithful sheep.'

The man answers :

'Ay, shepherd, faithful unto death.'

These are watchwords. The wicket is closed instantly. Then there is a rattling of bolts and chains, and the ponderous door swings on its massive hinges.

'Thou art eagerly expected,' the voice says.

The man enters, and the door is closed and barred again. He mounts a flight of store stairs, preceded by the owner of the voice, who opens a door, and then the two enter a small lighted chamber. The owner of the voice is a faithful manservant. The cloaked man is François. The house is the abode of Bomcester the mercer.

François, yielding to his supposed father's persuasion, and forgetting his pledge of fidelity made to the Queen, has come thus secretly and mysteriously to visit Lilian. He and the servant pass through this outer room, which is wainscoted and has a panelled ceiling. They enter in at a doorway, cross a narrow corridor, and then the servant draws aside a heavy curtain, revealing a well-lighted chamber. François enters, casts off his hat and cloak, and in another moment has clasped in his arms Lilian, who has been anxiously awaiting his coming.

As they stood thus embracing each other—she beautiful as a dream, he handsome as a Greek statue—they presented a picture that might have done to typify the grandeur and grace of the human form and the ardour of human love.

'Ah, François, how happy I am when thou art here!' sighed the beautiful girl, as she nestled to him, and allowed his lips to press hers.

And these words, together with the pressure of her soft arms and the warmth of her lips, begetting in him a rapturous passion, that was like a delightful madness, so to speak, made him forget everything—Queen, country, honour, pledges, everything save her.

'And I—I am in an ecstasy of bliss,' he cried, folding her still closer to him. 'But how does thy father and thy aunt?' he asked.

'They are well,' he answered; 'but my father is nightly engaged, and at this moment is closely closeted with strange men, and much I fear me that it means mischief, and that a conspiracy is being hatched. But he allows me to learn but

little, for he says that a woman knows not how to hold her tongue. Is not that *w*rong to my sex, dear François?’

‘Ay, by the Mass——’

‘Hush!’ she said in alarm, as she placed her white hand over his mouth. ‘Thou must not swear by the Mass here. An my father or my aunt heard thee, they would rail at thee as if thou wert in league with Satan himself.’

‘I forgot myself, sweet love,’ he replied; ‘but truly thy father does thee wrong when he says thou art not to be trusted. An I had the knowledge of them, I would trust thee with all the secrets of the State.’

‘Dear heart!’ she sighed in admiration. ‘Love blinds thee. But be ever blind thus. See not my faults, only my virtues.’

‘Faults!’ he exclaimed in enthusiasm. ‘Thou hast none. Thou art as perfect as a flawless jewel, as pure as an angel.’

‘Silly youth! knowest thou not that the devil hath angels, and they are *not* pure,’ said a harsh grating voice, and, turning round in confusion, he beheld the crabbed, sour face of Aunt Julia, as she stood in the doorway.

‘Greetings to thee and my dutiful service, lady,’ answered François, as, releasing his hold of Lilian, he bowed low.

‘The Lord give thee light and understanding,’ said Aunt Julia, with a melancholy sigh. ‘But come in, thou silly love-sick swain, for I would fain endeavour to sow good seed, and bring thee into the light of blessed truth.’

François and Lilian followed Aunt Julia, although they would have much preferred to have been left alone. They went into a small, snug room, where a wood fire blazed upon the hearth. Then Aunt Julia seated herself in a tall, straight-back chair, and folding her Bible to her scraggy breast, she sighed, and said: ‘The anger of the Lord goeth out upon the Papists, and thou, young man, art one of them. But I would pluck thee even as a brand from the burning, and save thee from everlasting torment.’

‘An I am able to call this dear girl my wife, then shall I know everlasting bliss,’ responded François, as he gazed with admiration into his loved one’s eyes, while she, hanging her head in maiden modesty, blushed scarlet. •

‘Cease thy irreverence,’ cried Aunt Julia. ‘There is no bliss on this earth. It is a wicked world—a world of groanings and darkness and the devil. Thou art tolerated in this house, young man, because we hope that that silly wench may

be the humble instrument of bringing thee into the fold of the chosen. We are but servants of the Lord, whose name be praised.'

'My world is here, and I wish for no other,' François sighed, turning to Lilian.

'Out upon thee for a silly loon!' cried Aunt Julia, hugging her Bible still closer. 'Your eyes are sealed to the light. Lilian will be but as a thorn in thy side. Alas! there is no joy in this vale of tears.'

'For some people,' added François roguishly, at the same time wishing that this very sour old woman would betake herself off, and do her moaning and groaning in the privacy of her own chamber.

'There is joy for none, sirrah,' cried the good dame sharply. 'When thou hast come to years of wisdom, as I have done, thou wilt then know what a hollow mockery is life.'

'Ay, madame; but till then there is a world of happiness to be enjoyed,' said François.

'Poor fool!' exclaimed Aunt Julia, with an expression of contemptuous pity on her shrivelled face, and turning her sunken, lack-lustre eyes ceilingwards; 'thy youth alone can excuse thy silly prattle. There is no happiness here, but woe, woe, woe. Thou shouldst cover thy body with sackcloth and thy head with ashes, and pray for the happiness that is to come.'

'I pray without the sackcloth and ashes, and my happiness is at hand,' answered François, as he passed his arm significantly round Lilian's waist.

'Irreverent scoffer and shameless boy!' snapped Aunt Julia indignantly. 'Sit farther away from that silly wench; and mark me well, the Lord will punish thee for thy wilful blindness. Thou art in a parlous state, and night nor day I shall know no rest until I have purged thee of thy Papistical foulness, and bathed thee in the living waters of everlasting truth. I tell thee, boy, this carnal world is a world of the devil, and he holds thee at this moment in his clutches. The Lord willing, I will rescue thee.'

'Whom wouldst thou rescue, sister?' asked Bomcester sternly, as he entered at this moment, much to the young couple's relief, who both rose quickly, and stood a little apart from each other.

'That poor Papist, who gropeth along in the darkness to the devil,' answered Aunt Julia.

'I give thee greeting, young man,' said Bomcester, fixing his cold, steel-like eyes on François. 'Thou shalt be rescued. Lilian there shall bring thee into the light. But thou wilt have to prove thyself worthy of her, and give evidence that thou art willing to renounce the damnable doctrines which have been instilled into thee. The chance of doing that shall be afforded thee this very night. Come with me, and I will put thy faithfulness to the test.'

Lilian turned pale at these words. She knew that at that very moment and under that very roof some plot was being hatched. Of the nature of the plot she had no knowledge, but she could make a shrewd guess that it was desperate and directed against the Queen. She had seen enough to be aware of the bitter hatred that her father and his followers cherished against her Majesty; she had also observed that during the last few days strange men had come in a mysterious manner to the house, and taken their departure in an equally mysterious way. Therefore she concluded at once that her father was entering into some desperate enterprise, into which he was wishful to lead her lover. These thoughts blanched her cheeks, and she shuddered on François's account. And had she dared to have done so she would have raised a protesting voice, and have dissuaded him from going. But she knew perfectly well that she could never hope to become his wife, if he did not comply with her father's wishes. She turned towards her father, and then dropping her eyes before his stern gaze, said: 'François, my father awaits thee. Go with him.' And, lowering her voice to a whisper so that her words reached his ear only, she murmured: 'Be watchful and cautious, and peril not thyself for my sake.'

'For thy sake I go,' he answered quickly; and turning towards Bomcester, said: 'I am at your service, sir. Put me to any test you will.'

Without another word Bomcester quickly left the room, and François followed him.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE CONSPIRATORS. α

BOMCESTER led the way along a gloomy corridor that was lighted only by a small oil-lamp suspended from the ceiling.

When he reached the end of this corridor he stopped, and, laying his heavy hand on the youth's shoulder, said in his customary solemn tones :

'Boy, thou lovest my daughter?'

'Passionately, sir.'

'And thou hast a wish to possess her?'

'Before aught else in the world.'

'You speak well, for she is a prize well worth the winning. I have wealth, and that wealth will be hers an she marries the man I choose for her. *That* she is bound to do, or marry not at all; for an she were to wed against my wish, I would slay her. But she loves thee, boy.'

'My heart tells me so, and I rejoice,' said François.

'Ay, but what wilt thou do to win her?' demanded Bomcester in deep, sepulchral tones.

'What you will, an I sully not my honour.'

'Thy honour can suffer not in embracing the cause for which we, as the apostles of truth, are struggling.'

Understanding the meaning of this, François remarked :

'I was brought up as a Papist, but——'

'Therefore art thou an unregenerated child of Satan,' said Bomcester quickly, and interrupting him.

'I was about to say,' François continued, 'that, though I have been educated in the old faith, for Lilian's sake I am willing to embrace the new.'

'Thou findest thy way into my heart by that determination,' answered Bomcester, shifting his hand from the youth's shoulder to his head, which he bent back a little so that he should the better see his face. 'When thou hast ratified that, the prize will be half won. But more will be required of thee.'

'What else would you have, sir?' asked François in surprise.

'Much,' answered the fanatic. 'We are the Lord's elect, and it is our duty to remove and beat down in His name all those who refuse to spread the light and to come into the fold.'

'You speak in riddles,' exclaimed François, shrinking back a little as he gathered something of Bomcester's meaning.

'Thou art dull,' the other returned. 'We would make thee an instrument of vengeance against those who, by their sin and wickedness, are bringing down the wrath of the Lord on the nation. Thou art in the Court, and thou knowest what a

sink of iniquity it is. 'We would cleanse it, and thou shalt help us.'

Indignation stirred François, and his high spirit chafed as he said :

'If you mean that I should become a spy and a traitor, tempt me no further, for I shall scorn you.'

Bomcester drew up his gaunt form to its full height, and, raising his arm with one finger pointing upward, he said with smothered wrath :

'Fool ! dost thou not know that in serving the Lord, and working for His cause, thou canst not be a traitor ? His enemies shall be scattered, even as the wind scattereth the ashes of a fire on a hill-top. But go thy ways, and think no more of Lilian.'

François's heart almost stood still at this terrible command, which he knew only too well the rigid fanatic would adhere to. He saw that he must choose between Lilian and loyalty, and he felt that he could not give up Lilian, whatever the sacrifice were that he was called upon to make ; and so, with great earnestness, he exclaimed :

'Sir, for Lilian's sake I will do your bidding blindly.'

The hard, knotted face of the fanatic lighted up with a look of triumph as he saw how by means of his beautiful daughter he could make this boy an instrument of destruction. He looked at François for some moments, then he said with an air of mystery :

'Thou hast saved thyself, and will yet win Lilian. Come.'

He tapped twice on a door at the end of the passage. There was the noise of a grating lock, the door was opened, and, following his guide, François crossed the threshold, and found himself in a large room, which was so dimly lighted that all the youth could make out was that round a large table were seated several men.

As Bomcester and François entered, a dead silence reigned. Not a word was spoken until the door had been closed behind them and locked. Then suddenly someone extinguished the light and all was darkness, at the same time a deep voice said, in hollow tones :

'Thou hast brought him.'

'Ay,' answered Bomcester ; 'and he is true.'

François felt uneasy. Not that he had any actual fear, for he did not imagine for a moment that he had been brought

there to be injured. But he knew perfectly well that he was to be made a party in some conspiracy, and his reward was to be Lilian. Presently the deep voice spoke again :

'Boy,' it said, 'thou art a favourite page to the Queen's Majesty.'

'Ay, sir, an so it please you,' François answered proudly, and feeling sure that in the speaker, although the voice was evidently disguised, he recognised the Queen's husband, Lord Darnley.

'Thy position, therefore,' the voice continued, 'enables thee to know something of her Majesty's private life?'

'Very little,' François answered cautiously.

'Thou art acquainted with one David Rizzio?'

'I am so acquainted.'

'What knowest thou of him?'

'Nothing.'

'Have a care,' cried the voice, with rising inflection in its tone.

'I repeat, I know nothing,' said François boldly.

'And I repeat, have a care,' answered the voice.

'An thou wouldst win Lilian for thy bride, answer truthfully whatsoever may be asked of thee,' said Bomcester, who was standing at his side.

'Thy life is at stake,' said the voice ; 'for shouldst thou not assent to what will be demanded of thee now, thou wilt never leave this room alive. A cord is ready at a given signal to be twisted about thy throat, shouldst thou refuse to serve us.'

Even at this dreadful threat, which he could not doubt would be put into execution by these desperate men, François did not wince. In the darkness he seemed to see Lilian's beautiful face, and he grew desperate himself, and reckless.

'Ask me what you will, sir,' he said, 'and I will answer you truthfully, according to my knowledge.'

'That is well,' said the voice, 'and thou wilt gain the mercer's daughter. And now say, hast thou seen aught passing between her Majesty and David Rizzio that would lead thee to suppose he was her Majesty's lover?'

'Nothing,' he answered.

'Beware,' said the voice threateningly.

'I speak but the truth,' François exclaimed with great decision.

'But thou knowest that Rizzio is a great favourite with the Queen's Majesty.'

‘Yes, so much do I know.’

‘And that he is oftⁿ alone with the Queen in her Majesty’s cabinet?’

‘Ay, sir; I have knowledge that her Majesty does so honour him.’

‘That is enough for our purpose,’ the voice continued. ‘And now listen, and mark well what is said to thee. We are bound by an oath to inflict summary vengeance on the enemies of the Lord, and this Rizzio, having sullied the honour of thy master, Lord Darnley, we have vowed that he shall die. It is thy duty to attend the Queen’s Majesty when she sups with her ladies and Rizzio in her cabinet.’

‘It is, an it please you, sir,’ François said, thrilling a little now with excitement, as he realized that he was being entangled against his will.

‘Good. Then we exact this duty from thee. Her Majesty’s cabinet communicates by means of a small door with a secret staircase. On Saturday night next thou wilt see that that door is left unlocked. Dost understand?’

‘Perfectly well,’ the poor youth answered, feeling somewhat relieved, for he fully expected that he himself was to slay Rizzio.

‘Fail not, then,’ said the voice, ‘an thou wouldst preserve thy life and gain Lilian Bomcester for thy bride. Thou mayst depart now, but remember that shouldst thou breathe aught of this to living soul no power on earth will save thee.’

François felt his arm grasped by Bomcester. The key was turned in the lock once more, the door was opened, and he was led out, without having seen even for a brief instant the faces of any of the men present.

CHAPTER XXII.

A SURPRISE.

BOMCESTER made no remark until he got to the door of the outer chamber, then he stopped suddenly, and said with that air of mystery he seemed so fond of adopting:

‘Thy future depends upon thy silence as to to-night’s work. Serve the Lord, and He will give thee a rich reward.’

He opened the door and went in, followed by François. Aunt Julia was sitting in the tall-backed chair, with her Bible

still clasped to her bony bosom, while Lilian was busy brooding a coil. She rose as the two men entered, and her face beamed with an expression of gladness at her lover's return; while Aunt Julia started up with a grunt, and mumbled in a sleepy way:

'May the enemies of the reformed faith be confounded and scattered.' Then, recognising her brother and François, she exclaimed: 'The Lord preserve us all! Methought the Papists were seeking to encompass us about with their machinations.'

'Thy head is wandering, sister. Thou art getting old and foolish.'

Aunt Julia sprang to her feet with an alacrity that was astonishing, and, twisting her vinegar visage into a striking resemblance to a gargoyle, she exclaimed:

'Out upon thee, brother, for a mannerless loon! Thou knowest well that thou hadst thy first trunk hose long before our blessed mother ushered me into this wicked world.'

'Peace, sister!' said her brother angrily. 'Thy tongue were better employed in mumbling thy prayers. Get thee to thy chamber.'

She tucked her Bible under her arm, folded her bony hands together, and, tossing her peaked head indignantly, answered:

'It is a grievous offence in the eyes of the Lord for a brother to be disrespectful to his young sister. I am a lone woman——'

'Get thee to thy chamber,' cried Anthony savagely.

'Come, child,' she said to Lilian, 'thy father is mad. Thou shalt lead me to my chamber, for I vow that my nerves are all unstrung. Give me thy arm, wench. Hast got thy scent casket?' Let me have it that I may sniff it, for I have a sudden faintness.'

Lilian had approached her aunt with the intention of obeying her command, when her father interposed, and thundered out, as he stamped his foot with rage:

'Get thee to thy chamber, Julia, and go alone, for Lilian remains here.'

Aunt Julia fairly jumped with fright.

'Oh!' she cried, 'that I should have lived to be thus treated by my mother's son. Satan has surely entered into thee. Cast him out, brother, and thou wouldst be saved.'

Her speech was cut short by Anthony, who, seizing her angular shoulders, pushed her through the doorway and out of the room.

Lilian rather enjoyed the scene, and yet she wondered what it all meant. It was no unusual thing for her father to rave at his sister, but what puzzled her was that, while her aunt had been sent to bed, she had been ordered to remain, for it was seldom she was allowed to be separated from Aunt Julia, who seemed appointed to fulfil the part of a watchful ogress. But her surprise and wonderment were immeasurably increased when Anthony pulled from his fob his ponderous watch, and said :

‘It lacks but a quarter to eleven of the night. Thou mayst employ that quarter in billing and cooing. But hearken, young sir : see that thou dost not blister my daughter’s lips, and—and be cautious.’

Without another word he left the room, leaving the young people almost dumfounded with astonishment, yet quite disposed to take advantage of their unexpected good fortune, for they were speedily locked in each other’s arms.

Bomcester had not acted as he had done without some ulterior motive. He knew something of human nature, and was therefore well aware that to encourage François’s passion was to makè him a still more pliable tool, and that passion could not be better encouraged than by leaving him and the girl alone. But the cunning and crafty Anthony still kept an eye on them, for in the corridor was a recess, and in the wall of this recess was a small square hole provided for purposes of ventilation. That hole commanded a full view of the room, and there the fanatic planted himself.

‘This is in very truth bliss,’ exclaimed François rapturously, as he clasped Lilian to his breast, and pressed hot kisses on her upturned face.

‘Thou must indeed have found thy way to my father’s heart!’ responded the girl, as she laid her head against his shoulders and twined her arms about his neck. ‘But tell me, sweet love, what has passed between thee and him? Right well I know that something mysterious is going on. Hast thou been taken into the secret? Tell me, love—tell me what it is, for I am dying to know!’

‘Not now, dear life,’ he answered.

‘Not now!’ she cried, raising her head and looking at him

in surprise. 'Wherefore not now? Hast thou so little faith in me, that thou canst not trust me with thy affairs? An it be so, then am I unworthy to mate with thee.'

'Nay, beloved Lilian, speak not like that,' he exclaimed anxiously, and drawing her closer again. 'There shall be no secrets between us save in this one matter, in which for the present my lips are sealed.'

'Now, then, thou dost affright me,' she cried, starting back, 'and my fears tell me that my father is engaged in some desperate venture. He has taken thee into his confidence, and it may be thy honour, thy safety, thy very life, are at stake. Oh, tell me, sweetheart, what it is, that I may advise thee.'

François was very uneasy. That his honour and safety were perilled he knew perfectly well, and yet he hesitated to tell Lilian, for he could hardly expect that she would lend herself to a plot in which treachery and murder were to form the chief features. If she were made acquainted with the facts, her sweet nature would revolt against the conspiracy, and some indiscretion on her part might betray all. He felt that he was on the horns of a dilemma. For a moment he was strongly tempted to tell her all, having first exacted from her a solemn promise of secrecy. But he checked himself, and fortunately so, as was subsequently proved.

'Lilian,' he exclaimed with warmth, 'thou knowest well that I worship thee, that I love the very ground upon which thy feet press, and for thy dear sake there is nothing I would not dare. But I pray thee, love, in this case urge me not to betray the confidence that has been placed in me. The times are dangerous, and even the walls have ears. It is therefore necessary that I should be cautious, or my life would pay the penalty.'

Lilian shuddered, for the earnestness with which her lover spoke convinced her that he had been drawn into a venture which she shrewdly guessed was directed against the Court, for she knew that her father in his burning fanaticism hated the Queen and all about her.

'We live in wicked and desperate times,' she sighed, 'and men are doing awful deeds against each other in the name of truth and religion. Keep thyself uncontaminated, and honest and just, and if it please Heaven that we are united as man and wife, we will withdraw from these scenes of intrigue and con-

spiracy, and endeavour to find a spot where we can live in peace and love, undisturbed by the passions of ambitious and wicked men.'

'Heaven hasten the hour that makes thee mine,' cried François fervently. 'For the peace you speak of, we must strive with all our might, and swerve never an inch from the path of honest duty.'

'Ah, lover of mine, how noble thou art!' Lilian murmured in admiration.

'It is sweet to hear thee say so,' he answered.

'François,' she said, looking up into his face, 'dost thou truly love me?'

'Love thee!' he exclaimed. 'Ay, by all that's sacred; by all my hopes of heaven; by the memory of my sainted mother. I swear it.'

'Thou makest me so happy,' she sighed.

'Thou hast faith in me?' he asked.

'Unbounded,' she murmured.

'And thy love is imperishable?'

'As imperishable as the stars.'

'But wilt thou always love me?'

'Always.'

'Through good and evil report?'

'Through good and evil report,' she answered. 'But wherefore dost thou ply me with these questions?'

'To gratify myself,' he said. 'I know that thou dost love me, but it is sweet to hear thee repeat over and over again that I am dear in thy sight. I would be thy world.'

'Thou art, and heaven, too,' she murmured. 'Thou art aware how dull and monotonous my life has been, and even rendered gloomy with the asceticism of my father and Aunt Julia. But when thou crossed my path I saw light breaking, and when thou made me understand how sweet a thing it is to love, I said to myself, "It may be that with this man I shall go out into a bright and happy future."''

'Ay, and thou shalt, or may Heaven forget me!' cried François with passionate enthusiasm, as he kissed her many times.

'I wonder often,' she said, 'if that sweet time is far distant.'

'An it were in my power, it should begin to-morrow,' he answered. 'But I will urge thy father to let it be soon.'

'I am afraid he will not consent to that. sweetheart, for he says we are too young yet.'

'But many as young as we become man and wife,' urged François.

'True, but we are in my father's hands. I must obey his wishes. At times I am troubled with strange misgivings.'

'Misgivings,' François echoed in alarm.

'Ay, love; but it may be that I vex myself with foolish and groundless fears.'

'Misgivings of what?' he asked, as though he had not noticed her last remark.

'Alas! I scarcely know; but I have had troubled dreams of late, and in my dreams thou hast always appeared as a vanishing phantom.'

'Dreams are but the foolish fancies of a tricky brain,' he said with a reassuring smile, and yet somehow in spite of himself not feeling assured. Why, it would have been impossible for him to explain, except by the theory that he had become unconsciously infected with her nervous fears.

'They may be so—they may be so,' she mused. 'Then she added piously: 'Let us pray to Heaven to guide us, let us be true and faithful to ourselves and each other, and then the future will bring us joy.'

'Thou art indeed a precious treasure,' he answered, as he embraced her with all the passion of an ardent lover.

'It is eleven of the clock,' growled Anthony Bomcester, entering at this moment unperceived, so that the lovers started from each other in confusion.

François understood that he was to go, and taking the hands of Lilian in both of his, he kissed her and bade her good-night.

'I will give thee exit,' said Anthony, leading the way to the outer corridor, where he took from a peg a horn lantern, and held it above his head, so as to throw the light forward. When they reached the massive door, he paused with his hand on the great lock, and looking into François's face, on which he caused the light of the lantern to fall, he said: 'Thou hast done well, boy, and saved thyself. I have heard all that has passed between thee and Lilian. Hadst thou betrayed our secret to her, thou wouldst have perished. Now thou shalt have her for thy wife.'

'When?' the youth asked eagerly.

'When thou hast proved thyself worthy of her.'
With this equivocal answer the gloomy fanatic opened the door.

'Good-night,' he mumbled; 'thou knowest thy way. Stumble not upon the stair, and avoid night prowlers.'

The great door was shut to with a clang, and François found himself on the balcony with the chill night air blowing about him and making him shiver.

CHAPTER XXIII.

ON THE BRINK OF DANGER.

FRANÇOIS pursued his way through the dark streets in a very reflective and meditative mood. The wind had gone down, and the sky had completely clouded over, while raindrops were beginning to fall. The streets were very deserted, for the hour was late, and all decent citizens were in their houses. Once François thought that he heard a footstep following him. He turned quickly round and saw, or fancied he saw, a figure disappear in a doorway. He did not venture back to prove or disprove his suspicions, for though he was as brave as a lion, he did not deem it prudent to thrust himself into unnecessary danger. He was, moreover, unarmed, and therefore would have had no chance against marauders bent on mischief. He consequently pulled his cloak about him, pressed his hat down, and hurried on as fast as he could, making a detour in order to avoid the patrol, for he was very anxious that there should be no evidence of his absence from the palace on this particular night.

He felt that he had committed himself to a course which might either make or mar him, and which under any circumstances was fraught with danger. He knew perfectly well that the utmost caution and discretion were needed; and all his vigilance would be required, for plots and counterplots were the order of the day, and hardly anyone was safe from suspicion; while those upon whom it fell were liable to be dealt with in a very summary fashion.

To say that François was altogether tranquil in his mind would be very far from the fact. He was in reality greatly troubled with conflicting thoughts, and this notwithstanding that it seemed fairly certain that success would crown his

'wooing.' But he had that night—against his will, it is true—become one of a band of conspirators whose object was to slay Rizzio, the Italian secretary of her Majesty the Queen, and, as gossip said, her secret lover. François knew that the young and handsome Italian enjoyed many privileges at the Court, and was a great favourite with the Queen, for he had rendered her much service. It was, in fact, due to him that she had married Darnley; and he had also brought about an alliance between Scotland and Spain in order to counteract the progress of the Reformation. He was a zealous Catholic, and had incurred the undying animosity of the Protestants. By his quick intelligence, his learning, and his far-seeing mind, he had succeeded in acquiring great power; and being a good musician and singer, he spent much time with the Queen, who was passionately fond of music, and had organized a band under Rizzio's leadership, for her special amusement. With everyone else in the Court, however, he was at variance and greatly disliked. He was arrogant and presumptuous, and in his dress and mode of living he tried to outrival the King, Lord Darnley.

François had knowledge of all this, and personally had a dislike for Rizzio, who had treated him by no means kindly. But this dislike did not carry him to the length of wishing Rizzio's death. On the contrary, had he been left to his own free will, he would have done much to have saved him: not for Rizzio's sake, but for the Queen's sake, for François was strongly attached to her Majesty. He knew how much he owed to her, and he had always experienced the greatest kindness at her hands. Therefore he had good cause to be personally grateful. But now circumstances had come about which for the time placed him amongst her enemies.

Love in his case had proved stronger than gratitude. But in an ardent and romantic youth, such as he was, it could hardly be otherwise. Lilian's beauty was enough to lure far older and sterner men than he, and though he had promised after his interview with the Queen to give up Lilian, he had been led into breaking his promise, and now was too far committed to withdraw; and though he did not love his Queen the less, he certainly loved Lilian the more.

Agitated with emotion that sprang from these varying thoughts, he pursued his way to the palace mechanically. He was unaware, therefore, that for some time he had been

followed. When he had nearly reached his destination he was suddenly seized, and the light from a lantern turned full upon his face, so that it was impossible for him to see who his assailants were.

‘That will do,’ said a voice; ‘we have convinced ourselves that it is François, the Queen’s page. Let him go.’

He was released as suddenly as he had been seized, and before he could recover from his surprise and alarm, the men hurried away into the darkness. This incident troubled him greatly, for he had been recognised, and he had no doubt that the men were some of the palace spies. Therefore his absence would be known, in all probability, to those from whom he was most anxious to keep it secret. However, the mischief was done, and he must make the best of it; but he was by no means in the happy frame of mind he had enjoyed a little while previously, when he was holding the beautiful Lilian to his breast. Making his way to the wall by which he had descended when he left some hours ago, he endeavoured to scale it, but found the feat to be utterly impossible without aid. The wall was perfectly smooth, and afforded no foot or hand hold, while the top was infinitely too high to be reached by springing up. With heavy heart, therefore, he was compelled to abandon that mode of gaining his lodgings, and had to present himself at one of the gates, where he was forced to answer to the challenge of the sentries, as he passed by them, so that any attempt to conceal the fact that he had been absent that night would be fruitless. He was too shrewd not to see how evidence of his absence might place him in an awkward position. For though this night was one on which he had no duties to perform, and so was free to amuse himself, yet after his promise to the Queen, and in the event of the dreadful deed which had been planned being carried out, his absence would bear a suspicious construction.

But what was done couldn’t be undone, and so, bidding the sentries a cheery good-night, he hurried to his quarters, and was soon locked in sleep.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE MURDER OF DAVID RIZZIO.

It was the ninth of March, and night had fallen upon the city of Edinburgh. It was a bitterly cold night, with gusty squalls that were charged with sleet and hail. Although it was not late, the streets were deserted, save by those who were compelled to be abroad, for the cold and the sleet were piercing. It seemed to be a fitting sort of night for conspiracy and for murder. But no one dreamed, save those who were in the secret, how desperate a deed was to be done before the morning dawned.

Led by Lord Ruthven, Lord Lindsay, and the Earl of Morton, two hundred armed men marched as stealthily as it was possible for men to march, and made their way to Holyrood Palace, where they seized the entrance to the palace, disarmed the guards, and occupied the courtyard. Lord Darnley had supped early, in order that he might be ready to receive them.

In the meantime the unfortunate Queen, little recking how shamefully she had been betrayed, and how her favourite, Rizzio, was fatally menaced, was supping with him in her private cabinet together with the Countess of Argyle and some members of her Majesty's household. It was a pleasant little chamber, well lighted with several lamps; while the walls were hung with costly tapestry. François and another page were in attendance on her Majesty. On one side of the room was a secret door, screened by the tapestry, and generally used by Rizzio. The door was always locked; but on this particular night it was not so, for François had previously taken care to unlock it in accordance with the part he had been forced to play in the dread conspiracy.

It had cost him a great struggle to do this, and once or twice he had been tempted to fall at her Majesty's feet and confess all, or else secretly convey a warning to Rizzio to seek safety in flight. But he had resisted the temptation, for love proved stronger than either gratitude or duty, and the fear of losing Lilian kept him silent. Nevertheless, he was greatly agitated and confused. Every rustling of the tapestry, every blast of wind, startled him, so that, the

Queen's attention being attracted by his unusual manner, she asked :

'What ails thee, François? thou art absent and strange to-night.'

'It is nothing, your Majesty, an it please you.'

'Nothing!' cried the Queen. 'By my faith an that be nothing, it would be interesting to know what something is.'

'An I know aught of such signs, your Majesty,' said Rizzio with a laugh, 'I should say the poor calf is love-sick.'

The blood rushed into François's face at these words, and the Queen, remembering his confession about Lilian Bomcester, fixed him with her eyes, and said :

'No, David. He had a touch of that fever, but I cured him, for he is youthful, and the disease had made no great inroads. Eh? Is that not so, boy?'

François felt ready to sink through the floor. He knew perfectly well what the Queen meant. Her meaning was that she had unbounded faith in him, and never believed for an instant that he had broken the pledge he had made to her when she had allowed him to kiss her royal lips. Now for the first time he must be traitor to himself, and descend to tell her Majesty a falsehood. And so, bowing his head in shame and confusion, he said :

'It is as your Majesty says.'

'And thy heart is still whole?' asked the Queen, with significance in her tone and eyeing him askance, for his manner caused her to doubt.

'Quite whole,' he muttered.

'Lucky youth,' sighed Rizzio. 'Keep it whole, boy, an thou wouldst enjoy life.'

François bowed, but ventured on no reply; he felt faint and sick, for he knew that the Queen's eyes were still upon him, and that she was doubting him; and he knew also that the man who had just spoken so gaily to him was doomed to die a violent death that night.

A few minutes later the secret door was suddenly opened, and Lord Darnley entered. The Queen started and turned pale at this unexpected appearance of her husband, but when he passed round to the back of her chair, she turned and embraced him affectionately, saying pleasantly :

'Thou comest unheralded, my lord, and by secret ways.'

'Ay, madame,' he answered. 'Am I not welcome?'

'In faith, thou art very welcome,' she answered. 'But thy unceremonious intrusion on the privacy of my friends needs explanation, my lord.'

'The explanation is there,' he answered, as once more the door opened, and there strode in a tall man, clad in complete armour, his visor up, and his face haggard and ghastly with disease.

The Queen was amazed and frightened; her own face turned ashen, for she guessed that this was an evil portent, and that she or her favourite was menaced.

The man in armour was Lord Ruthven, and he was followed immediately by George Douglas, Faudonside, and Patrick Bellenden, who were armed with daggers and pistols. Consternation seized all present. François crouched into a corner, and Rizzio, pale as 'Pale Death,' felt that his end had come, and he turned a piteous look upon the Queen.

'Sir,' she said, addressing Ruthven in stern and imperious tones, 'by whose permission hast thou dared to come unbidden into our presence?'

'Let it please your Majesty,' said Ruthven firmly, 'that yonder man, David Rizzio, come forth of your privy chamber, where he hath been over-long.'

'What offence hath he done?' asked the poor Queen, with blanched and trembling lips.

'He has made a great and heinous offence to your Majesty's honour,' answered Ruthven surlily, 'and also to the King your husband, as well as to the nobility and the commonwealth.'

The Queen drew herself up indignantly, and, almost livid with rage, she exclaimed:

'And by what right, my Lord Ruthven, dost thou dare to turn accuser thus in the privacy of our chamber?'

'By the right of a free citizen of this realm, madame.'

'If thou or any other man hath any charge to bring against Rizzio, thou must make it in the proper way, and he shall be cited before the Lords of Parliament,' the Queen said, very angrily.

But Ruthven, indifferent to her anger, answered:

'We who have charges against him have a more summary and effectual way of dealing with him.'

'Retire, my lord, instantly, or thou shalt be arraigned for treason,' the Queen commanded sternly; but without heeding

her, he moved towards the trembling Rizzio, who rushed behind the Queen, exclaiming:

‘Madame, I am dead! Have mercy! Save my life, madame—save my life!’

Ruthven and his assassins pressed forward, and Rizzio, ashen with horror, continued to cry out for pity. The Queen, with dauntless mien, endeavoured to defend him, and in the struggle she herself was pushed down, and the table fell upon her. In his fright Rizzio seized her dress and clung to her; but Darnley, who up to this time had been a passive spectator of the terrible scene, loosed his hands, and then, in order to prevent the Queen making any further effort to save him, he clasped her tightly in his arms. Then the murderers rushed forward and dragged the trembling and pallid Italian away. At this sight her Majesty turned indignantly to her husband, and said:

‘You, my lord, should not forget the good services this David Rizzio has rendered you. You owe him much. Have you no pity? Raise your voice, sir, and command these murderous ruffians to release their victim, on pain of death to themselves.’

‘Madame,’ answered Darnley hypocritically, ‘thy servant will not be injured.’

‘Then, wherefore has he been cruelly taken forth of our cabinet?’ asked the Queen, beginning to fear for her own life.

‘Thou shalt know anon,’ her husband murmured.

In the meantime Rizzio was dragged through the Queen’s bedchamber to the entrance of her sitting-room, which adjoined it. There there were a crowd of the conspirators waiting for their victim. Rizzio whined piteously for mercy, and Morton and Lindsay suggested that he should be spared until the following day; but George Douglas, who had borrowed the King’s dagger, rushed forward and struck the wretched man with it, crying out at the same time:

‘That is the royal blow. Who will follow?’

Instantly the surging crowd of assassins closed around him, and blow after blow was fiercely struck, until he was mangled by no fewer than fifty-six wounds. The ghastly work being completed, a window was raised, and the bleeding and still palpitating body was flung out into the courtyard. Then Ruthven, looking like a corpse himself, and bespattered with his victim’s blood, reeled faint and sick into the Queen’s

cabinet, and, seizing a cup of wine, gulped it down, and exclaimed when he had got his breath :

‘Madame, your favourite has been put to death because he was a disgrace to yourself and a curse to your kingdom, and because he has exercised such pernicious influence over you that he has induced you to tyrannize over and to banish your nobility. And on his account, madame, you have maintained blameworthy connections with foreign princes in order that you might restore the ancient religion; and you have admitted into your counsels the Earls of Bothwell and Huntley, who are both traitors.’

The Queen heard this impudent and daring speech with burning indignation and shame; and she turned with scarlet face to her husband, saying :

‘You are a coward to have permitted this dastardly crime; you have inflicted a lasting disgrace upon me, notwithstanding that I took you from a humble position and raised you to the throne. Shame on you, you traitor and son of a traitor!’

‘Madame,’ answered her husband abjectly, ‘it was to save your honour and preserve my contentment that I gave my consent to his being taken away.’

‘Shame on you!’ she repeated, with a passionate burst of energy, and weeping bitterly. ‘Shame on you!’ she cried again. ‘Never again shall I know happiness until I have made you feel something of the shame, humiliation, and sorrow you have inflicted on me. It shall be dear blood to some of you. Mark me well what I say.’

Ruthven presented a ghastly spectacle; his face, in which death was plainly written, was livid; he suddenly tossed off his helmet, and seemed to be struggling hard to draw his breath; but at the Queen’s word he started up, and with the rudeness and coarseness which characterized him, he exclaimed :

‘God forbid, madame! for the more your Grace shows yourself offended, the worse the world will judge of you.’

The Queen, unable to endure the scene any longer, turned away to her chamber, where her brutal enemies locked her up all that fearful night, and would not permit her the consolation even of one of her gentlewomen.

When she had gone, Ruthven, whose disease, which was destined two months later to kill him, had been much aggravated by the terrible work in which he had that night engaged, sank into a stupor; and Darnley, turning to François,

who, dumb with horror and bitter repentance, still crouched in a corner, said :

‘Rouse thee, boy, thou hast done well, and for thy part in this good night’s work thou wilt be rewarded with Bomcester’s pretty daughter.’

Renaud, who in his capacity of physician had been previously summoned to attend to Lord Ruthven, appeared in the room at this moment, and hearing Darnley’s words, he said, with assumed indignation and revolting hypocrisy :

‘If what you say, my Lord Darnley, means aught, it means that my son has been an actor in this sad tragedy.’

‘Ay, and wherefore not?’ Darnley responded loftily. ‘It is a good night’s work, and thy son has merited well of his country.’

‘He is a traitor!’ cried Renaud, still affecting to be highly indignant.

At these words François sprang forward, and, kneeling at Renaud’s feet, exclaimed :

‘You are right, sir ; I am indeed a traitor.’

‘Go thy ways,’ said Renaud, spurning him : ‘and doubt not that this act will meet with condign punishment.’

François rose, and with bowed head left the room ; then Darnley, turning angrily to Renaud, said :

‘Talk not of punishment, sirrah ; but give thy duty and attention to this worthy gentleman, my Lord of Ruthven, who seems to be in a parlous state.’

Darnley left the room, and Renaud, knowing how politic it was to be silent in the present critical state of affairs, obeyed his command, and proceeded to administer a restorative to Ruthven.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE QUEEN PLAYS HAZARD AND WINS.

DURING the fearful night which followed the murder of David Rizzio the wretched Queen was plunged in the deepest affliction, and was kept a captive in her room. On the following day her husband proclaimed himself King, and at once pronounced the dissolution of Parliament, commanding its members to leave Edinburgh within three hours on pain of treason. A little later he went to his wife’s room and found her prostrated

with grief. The vivid impression of the awful spectacle she had witnessed, the image of the brutal and terrible Ruthven, who seemed ready to strike her down, and the dark designs which she could not doubt were entertained against her by her corrupt nobility, all served to excite her to an unusual degree, and to throw her into a sort of delirium. Her weak and cowardly husband was startled and moved to sympathy by her condition, and determined that she should have attendance, and in spite of the protests of his confederates he ordered her gentlewomen to her.

Although the Queen was bowed and crushed for the time, her marvellous mental powers enabled her to triumph over her physical prostration ; and seeing clearly that she must entirely depend upon herself if she would be saved, and cherishing in her heart a burning sense of wrong and outrage, and a lively desire for a swift and terrible vengeance, she began to dissemble. She knew well what a poor, weak fool Darnley was, and so, simulating warm affection for him, she used all her arts and wiles to win him to her side. She pointed out to him that he was placing himself in the power of her and his enemies, who in their yearning for power would not fail to turn upon him ultimately, and hurl him from the throne.

Darnley was much impressed and influenced by these representations, which he knew only too well were liable to be realized, for intrigue, conspiracies, and murder were the order of the day; and conscious of his own innate weakness of character, he felt that he could not hope to hold his own against the cabal that would be formed by the traitors. He therefore yielded to the Queen, and consented to aid her.

The palace was still occupied by the conspirators, the leaders of whom were engaged in maturing their plans for imprisoning the Queen in Stirling Castle, and in placing Darnley at the head of affairs. But only as a puppet, for they knew his indecision of character too well to entrust him with absolute and despotic power.

After his interview with the Queen, Darnley had an audience with the leaders, and represented to them that his wife was in a fever, and that her life would be endangered unless they consented to withdraw and leave her for a time in peace and quietude. He pledged himself to undertake her guardianship, and to see that she did not escape. He also assured

them that she had expressed her willingness to forgive the murder of Rizzio.

The conspirators were very sceptical, and announced their firm belief that she was only practising an artifice in order to gain time and rally her friends. But the King persisted in his statements, and pledged himself to safeguard her; and so after much parleying, and a display of mutual distrust, he prevailed over his confederates, who reluctantly consented to withdraw. On Monday evening they left the palace, but openly declared their doubts as to the King's fidelity. As soon as they had gone, the gates were closed, strong guards were posted all over the grounds and in the courtyard, and everything was done to prevent another surprise; while the inmates, even to the humblest servant, were given to understand that any attempt on their part to leave the palace or communicate with anyone outside would be punished with instant death.

These measures of safety having been taken, Darnley at once repaired to his wife's chamber, where she renewed her expressions of affection, and proposed to him that their only real safety now lay in flight, and that if they could succeed in reaching the Castle of Dunbar all would yet be well. To this course Darnley assented, and the Queen immediately summoned to her presence the captain of the guard, who had proved himself staunch and loyal. To him she confided the scheme, and bade him have fleet horses ready at midnight. He withdrew, together with Darnley, to mature the plan, and to take every precaution to prevent its miscarriage.

When she was once more alone with her gentlewomen, the Queen wept bitterly, for her profound sorrow at the loss of Rizzio was not one jot abated, and turning to Adrienne de Bois, who was amongst her faithful attendants, she exclaimed:

'Ah, woe is me that I should be thus treated! Those whom I have most trusted and loved have betrayed me; and my kindness and attention have been repaid with base ingratitude. Even thy foster son, Adrienne, has proved a traitor.'

'Alas, madame, I fear me that it is so.'

'Of that there is no doubt,' answered the Queen. 'We had reason to believe he was playing us false, and we had him watched by our spies. He was seen to go to the house of the arch-traitor, Bomcestor—lured thither, no doubt, by the pretty

daughter—and notwithstanding that he pledged me that he would have nothing more to do with her.’

‘How know you, madame, that he went there?’ asked Adrienne, feeling sceptical, and finding it difficult to realize that the boy she had loved so well should prove so false.

‘His own father informed us that he had clandestinely left the palace.’ Adrienne started and turned pale at this statement. ‘We therefore set a watch upon him,’ continued the Queen, ‘and on leaving Bomcester’s house he was seized and identified in order that there should be no possibility of doubt. I intended at a proper time to have taxed him with his breach of faith, for I thought his worst crime was his infatuation for the old fanatic’s daughter. But now I learn from Renaud, whose love and respect for me earns my lasting gratitude, that his unworthy son was actually in the conspiracy for the barbarous slaying of poor Rizzio.’

‘Alas, your Grace, this is heavy news indeed,’ moaned Adrienne, as she fell weeping at the Queen’s feet, while her heart was filled with intense bitterness at the thought that Renaud should have betrayed his own son.

‘Rise, good Adrienne,’ said the Queen. ‘Thou at least art faithful. Punishment shall be meted out to all our enemies, and a full share shall fall upon the head of this unworthy and traitorous boy.’

Adrienne did not rise at the Queen’s request. She was too much cut up and overwhelmed with sorrow; while fear for François deprived her of speech for some minutes. She held the Queen’s hand between her own, and her hot tears fell upon it. When she had regained her self-possession a little, she said in piteous accents:

‘Ah, your Majesty, fain would I plead for François. That he has been wayward and wilful I cannot doubt. But your Grace is full of compassion, and I pray you look lightly upon his transgressions.’

Her Majesty was evidently greatly annoyed, and she turned a look of anger upon the kneeling woman at her feet.

‘Rise, I bid thee,’ she said; ‘and when thou plead’st for something that is reasonable we may be disposed to grant it. But now we are too aggrieved and cast down to be inclined to listen to prayers for traitors. Our person has been insulted, our servant barbarously done to death, our privacy shamefully intruded upon, and we ourselves have been kept prisoner in

our own palace. Dost think that such outrages can be dealt with lightly? No. Mademoiselle Adrienne, there shall be a swift and certain reckoning, and woe be to those who have played us false. François shall no more escape than shall the arch-leader of these despicable conspirators.'

Adrienne had risen at the Queen's peremptory command, and stood now in sorrowful attitude before her, and said, when her Majesty had done speaking:

'I pray humbly, your Grace, that your Grace's enemies may be speedily confounded, but amongst them I crave leave to think that François cannot be included. He is devoted to your Majesty; nay, I pledge my life to it. And, pardon me for saying so, I am of opinion that, for reasons which I cannot divine, his father is his enemy and wishes him away. Therefore he does not hesitate to speak ill of him.'

The Queen grew red with anger at these words, and she said excitedly:

'Out upon thee for a spiteful jade! Thou bringest thyself into contempt in our sight by endeavouring to vilify so staunch and faithful a servant as Dr. Renaud. He has proved his devotion by not failing to impeach even his own son. But thou hast always borne ill-feeling for Renaud. Wherefore so?'

Adrienne saw that further argument would be useless. Then, and in broken voice, she said:

'I am faint, your Majesty, and crave your leave to withdraw.'

'Get thee gone at once,' exclaimed the Queen passionately, *'and quit our palace without loss of time! We do not wish to ever look upon thy face again!'*

Adrienne heard these terrible words with a shudder, for they seemed to her like a doom, and all her hopes died in her heart. She tried to make some answer, but could not. The words stuck in her throat. Her face was pallid, and her heart cold with a nameless fear. She paused for some moments, until she had regained some little control over herself. Then she suddenly seized the Queen's hand and kissed it fervently several times, and managed to stammer forth:

'Farewell, your Majesty. You will live to prove that I am faithful and true to you.'

She could say no more, but, turning away, she fairly staggered out of the room.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE MIDNIGHT FLIGHT.

THE great bell of the Tron Church had tolled midnight, and a solemn silence, like that of death, reigned over the city and the palace, in striking contrast to the din and clash of arms, and the hoarse roar of drunken and passionate voices, which had filled the air some hours ago. Three powerful and fleet horses stood, ready saddled, in the courtyard; and, in order that they might make no noise, their hoofs were enveloped in woollen cloths. The Captain of the Guard was Arthur Erskine, a bold and dauntless man, who was devoted to the Queen. He had taken the precaution to personally set the watch that night, and had posted at the various gates only men whom he knew he could implicitly trust. Those about whom he had the slightest doubt he had supplied with unlimited quantities of wine and cognac, and they were all either sunk in a drunken sleep or, at any rate, helpless to offer any resistance, even had they been so inclined.

The majority of the servants had been sent to bed, and only a few of the most attached attendants and gentlewomen were in the Queen's secret.

Her Majesty, in order to prepare herself for the arduous undertaking upon which she knew her kingdom, her throne, and her very life depended, had for some hours previously tried to compose herself and obtain sleep. But the sleep only came to her in snatches, for she was racked with a burning unrest and a craving for a speedy vengeance on her foes. She had completely gained over her silly husband, and he was to accompany her in her flight, together with Arthur Erskine. Darnley had suggested a troop of horse-soldiers going with her, but she had determinedly opposed this on the grounds that they would only prove an impediment to rapid flight, and might have to succumb if overtaken by a superior force.

'Our safety will be in swiftness,' she had said; 'but should a small number of our enemies overtake us, I warrant me that we shall prove a match for at least a dozen of them,' and then she added with significance, 'unless *thy* heart fails thee, my husband.'

She had no faith in his personal courage. She knew him

to be a poor, weak, vacillating creature, with no resource and little energy. But Erskine was dauntless as a lion, and in her defence would fight like a savage lion at bay ; while as for herself, she mentally vowed never to be taken alive.

‘Nay,’ her husband had answered ; ‘my heart won’t fail me ; I will defend thee to the death. If I have ever cherished bitterness against thee, it is gone now. It died with the man Rizzio. I am now thy devoted lover, and what will a lover not do ?’

His reference to Rizzio was an unfortunate one. It filled the Queen with fierce anger, and increased her hatred for her traitorous husband ; but with her wonderful self-control she had given no signs of her feelings. She was not yet out of the wood, and she knew that an indiscreet word or act might once more place her in the hands of her enemies.

All being ready for the start, her Majesty divested herself of her fine clothes, and donned the modest attire of a serving-maid. But round her waist she wore a leathern belt, in which she carried two pistols and a long, keen dagger. She had also impressed upon Erskine not to neglect to have heavily-loaded pistols in the holsters of the saddles. Over her dress she threw a dark cloak with a hood that fitted to the head, and fastened with a band at the neck. Thus equipped, she was on the point of leaving her chamber, when Adrienne de Bois entered hurriedly, and, throwing herself at the Queen’s feet, seized her Majesty’s gown, and cried passionately, and yet in subdued tones :

‘Your Majesty, hear, hear me ! Say that I have your pardon before you leave ! Pity me, I beseech you !’

This detention only enraged the Queen, who, believing that Adrienne had meanly tried to asperse the character of Renaud, felt that she could not forgive her, and plucking her gown away violently, she cried :

‘Begone, woman ! Thou art banished from our kingdom ! When we return—and return we assuredly will—if we find thee here, thy life shall be forfeited. I vow it by the Holy Cross.’

With a piteous wail of heart-broken pain, Adrienne sank to the floor in a swoon, and her Majesty hurried from the room. She descended the secret staircase, up which Rizzio’s murderers had come, and when she gained the courtyard, she found Darnley and Erskine already in their saddles. Erskine

was heavily armed, but wore no armour, in order that his horse might not be overweighted. He was about to descend, in order to assist the Queen, but before he could do so she had sprung lightly into the saddle.

Fortunately the night was gloomy. The sky was overcast, and rain was threatening. The gate facing the courtyard was wide open by order of Erskine, and two of his trusty men stood one on each side to close it instantly the fugitives had passed. All was very still. Not a light gleamed from one of the many windows of the palace, which rose up shadowy and grim in the darkness, its salient angles and outlines alone being definable.

‘Is your Majesty ready?’ Erskine whispered.

‘Quite,’ she answered, while her heart palpitated wildly with new-born hopes and the near prospect of liberty and vengeance.

Erskine gave a low whistle as a signal to the guard at the gate. Then, under his breath, he said, ‘Off.’ The three riders dug their rowels into the sides of the horses, which bounded forward, the muffled hoofs making never a sound. Like phantoms they sped through the gateway, and the iron gate shut silently behind them. Then once more the riders spurred their steeds. Each rider knew that it was liberty or death, and so at breakneck pace they sped on their wild night journey of twenty-five miles to the Castle of Dunbar.

CHAPTER XXVII.

WITH ACHING HEART.

GREAT was the consternation on the following morning amongst the conspirators when they found that their captive bird had flown. And great was their fear also, for they doubted not that now that the Queen was at liberty she would speedily rally around her powerful friends and raise an army, and then woe betide those who had dared to attempt to overthrow her authority! Against Daruley there was one universal feeling of hatred, and many were the execrations uttered against him, for he had betrayed them, and proved false to all his pledges.

Notwithstanding all their fears, however, the conspirators

despatched Lord Semple after the fugitive Queen to demand from her the fulfilment of her promise to give them an indemnity against the consequences of their crime. The messenger duly arrived at Dunbar, but the Queen would give him no answer for three days. And during those three days what a lot she accomplished ! By the aid of the Earls of Bothwell, Huntly, Athol Marshal, and Caithness, and the Archbishop of St. Andrews, the Lords Hume and Yester, she found herself at the head of a powerful army. Then, throwing off all disguise, she appeared as the Queen of Scotland again, and immediately issued a proclamation against all those who had been concerned in the late outrage and murder, and cited them to appear before her.

We must turn back a little, however, in point of time in order to follow the other characters in the story.

Poor Adrienne de Bois, who had fallen into disgrace with the Queen, was fairly broken-hearted ; but she thought less of herself than of François. It was very hard for her, who had been the Queen's faithful follower from childhood, to be banished now from all that she held dear ; but to her mind it was harder that the boy she loved with all a mother's love should have to bear the Queen's anger. On the day following the Queen's flight Adrienne was so ill that she could scarcely stand, but, nevertheless, she made her way to François's lodgings, where she found him cast down and suffering in mind and body.

'Oh, my son !' she cried passionately, as she flung her arms round his neck, 'what hast thou done to bring thyself thus into the Queen's displeasure ? Surely thou canst not have been guilty of conspiring against her. Thou hast been misled. Thou hast been drawn into the webs of these bold, bad men who have committed this fearful deed, but thine own hands are clean and thy heart is free from guile. Assure me that it is so, my son, or I shall die.'

François was greatly distressed at Adrienne's passionate grief, but he felt ashamed of himself, and all unworthy of her love and devotion. He tenderly loosed her arms from his neck and led her to a seat. Then he answered :

'I have been drawn into this matter.' But, oh, it was for love's sake !

'For love's sake !' she cried in astonishment.

'Truly so. Sweet Lilian Bomcester's beauty has cast a spell upon me.'

'A spell of madness, verily,' said Adrienne with warmth. 'Since thou couldst be so blinded by love as to forget thy solemn duty to the Queen, to whom thou owest so much. Thou wert aware, then, of this cowardly conspiracy?'

'I was.'

'And what part didst thou play in it?'

He was abashed, and hung his head in bitter shame, and not for some moments did he answer. Then:

'I left the door of her Majesty's cabinet unlocked in order that the conspirators might enter without let or hindrance.'

'Oh, boy, thou hast broken my heart!' Adrienne cried, as, bursting into tears, she covered her face with her hands. François was greatly touched, and, going to her, he tried to caress her. But she pushed him away, and he turned sadly towards the window to hide the tears that were streaming down his cheeks.

'Thou hast brought shame on me,' she moaned, 'and on thyself eternal disgrace.'

'Shame!' he echoed, turning deadly pale, as he faced her.

'Ay, François,' she said sadly, 'and I must go away.'

'An thou go, then I go also with thee,' he answered resolutely.

'Nay, that is impossible,' she replied.

'Wherefore impossible?' he cried.

'Firstly, because her Majesty has not so commanded thee, and therefore thou wouldst be still further guilty of disobedience. And secondly, because it is thy duty to remain here until her Majesty returns.'

'Duty,' he murmured—'duty to fall a victim to her Majesty's wrath.'

'Thou hast brought the wrath upon thyself,' Adrienne answered a little sharply, for though she loved François, she could not help a feeling of anger; 'and as thou hast made a rod for thine own back, thou must perforce bear the whipping.'

'Ay, I fear it must be so,' he said, with a great sigh, as he saw clearly that he had involved himself in a very dangerous difficulty; and while yearning to do something that would conspicuously display his loyalty to the Queen, he could not avoid his heart going out to the beautiful Lilian. If he was disloyal, it was for beauty's sake; and if he forgot his duty, it was because Lilian had enslaved him. And yet he knew that if he adhered to Lilian he must be false to the Queen; and if

he served the Queen faithfully he must give up Lillian, for her father would never consent to her marriage with one who worshipped in the old faith and who loyally served her Majesty. He must decide for love or Queen—that is, assuring that he was yet left free to choose ; but at that moment all was doubt and uncertainty, and he knew not whether when her Majesty returned, she would not sacrifice him, amongst others, to her vengeance. If he fled, whither could he go ? He might ally himself to the Queen's enemies, but if she regained power they would be scattered, and he might find himself wandering about the country like a hunted beast. Means he had none, and friends he had none outside of the palace ; and he felt perfectly sure that if he relied on the fanatical Bomcester it would be leaning on a very rotten reed. He therefore had no alternative but to remain where he was and meet his fate, whatever that might be.

He was much cut up to see how distressed Adrienne was ; and kneeling down beside her, he drew her arms about him, while she, yielding to a womanly instinct, pressed his head to her throbbing bosom, and sobbed bitterly.

‘ Do not weep,’ he said affectionately. ‘ Thou hast been a fond and doting mother to me, and the love I have lacked in my father I have found in thee, and I am deeply, truly grateful. If her Majesty does not exact the forfeit of my poor life, I will strive honestly and faithfully to do my duty, and will endeavour by good deeds to win thee a place again in her love. But promise me this, dear mother : thou wilt not go away. Say that it shall be so.’

The suggestion that the Queen might exact the forfeit of his life produced a sickening sense of fear in Adrienne, for she knew that the Queen was revengeful, and would be little disposed to show the slightest leniency to anyone who had been even indirectly instrumental in bringing about Rizzio's death. She was sorely troubled as this thought came to her, and was on the point of urging François to fly with her. But, on the other hand, she clearly perceived that this course could only serve to do away with every chance of his gaining the Queen's pardon ; for his share in the conspiracy would be magnified, and a price would assuredly be set upon his head. And certainly he would not be able to find a place of safety, save it was in England or France. Under these circumstances she resisted the temptation to propose flight to him, but she

resolved on another course in order to endeavour to lighten the punishment which the Queen might be pleased to inflict.

She rose and embraced him, and said: 'I will think over thy words; at any rate, I will try to remain as near to thee as may be possible.'

She kissed him affectionately; he returned her embrace, and having arranged to see her again that evening, he allowed her to go from him, and when he was once more alone he sank into a chair, and, burying his face in his hands, pondered on his future. He was not quite hopeless, but he could not help thinking that even if he escaped with his life, his future would be dark and tortuous.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

HOW RENAUD SCORED A TRIUMPH.

WHEN Adrienne left her foster son she made her way to Renaud. He seemed somehow as though he had been expecting her, for he rose from a table where he had been engaged in the study of some Latin book on medicine, and, placing a seat for her, said, with a sardonic smile:

'So you have come at last.'

Adrienne was too agitated and too seriously troubled to notice the significance of this remark. Perhaps at any other time she would have been struck by his manner, for though she had never before been to his private room, he seemed not at all surprised, but accepted her visit as quite in accordance with his own thoughts. As he offered her a seat, and she accepted it, she shuddered ever so slightly, for she really had a dread of the man—a dread that had become positive hatred since that interview in the picture-gallery. Yet now she had absolutely come to sue to him—sue to the man whom she despised.

It seemed like the very irony of fate that she, who had once had influence and power with the Queen, should now, as an outcast, find herself compelled to come to a man who in a few brief years had risen from nameless obscurity to a position which, in some limited respects, enabled him to be a dictator. They were, however, whirligig times in which these people lived; and the man who was the Queen's idol to-day might

to-morrow be handed over to the headsman. Adrienne had fallen from favour into disgrace, and though she could have suffered and sorrowed in silence so far as she herself was concerned, she felt that the motherly instincts of her woman's nature would not allow her to remain dumb when the boy she loved with a mother's love, although she was not his mother, was in peril.

When she had somewhat composed herself, she made answer to Renaud :

'Thou dost not seem to be much affected by the terrible events of the last few hours.'

'Wherefore should I be?' he asked brusquely. 'I neither loved nor hated David Rizzio, and therefore I can look upon his death with indifference.'

'But surely thou hast some regard for thy Queen,' Adrienne exclaimed sharply, experiencing a sense of intense disgust at his brutal cynicism. 'To her thy rise and present power is due. Hast thou no gratitude?'

'Yes; I have both regard and gratitude,' he answered with deliberation.

'Then, how is it I find thee so calm when the Sovereign of these realms is in flight from her enemies?'

He smiled contemptuously as he replied : "

'I have schooled myself into philosophy, and nothing surprises me. But I might be more concerned did I not deem it in the highest degree probable that her Majesty will speedily return, and, with a mighty power, crush those who have opposed her. But as it should not be so, I shall know how to take care of myself and those who love me, even amidst the ruins of a throne and the anarchy of a nation.'

'Thy selfishness is hateful,' she said bitterly.

'We are all selfish, from the Queen downwards,' he returned. 'Selfishness is the primary law of our being. Had I not been selfish I should not have risen as I have. But, nevertheless, I have thought and feeling for those who are bound to me and serve me.'

'I am glad to hear thee say so,' she answered, 'since thy son stands sorely in need now of thy thoughts and feelings.'

'My son is a traitor,' he answered quickly.

'I am aware that thou hast so impeached him, even to the Queen,' Adrienne remarked with bitter irony.

'And wouldst thou have counselled me to do otherwise?'

'He is thy son,' said Adrienne sternly.

'And I am her Majesty's loyal and dutiful subject. And in doing what I have, I have but done my duty,' he answered.

'Thou hast exceeded thy duty, since thy conduct has placed him in grievous peril.'

'But thou art all powerful to shelter him from the consequences of his folly,' Renaud said pointedly, and with a cold smile of sarcasm wreathing itself about his thin lips. 'With a friend such as thou art at his back he has little to fear.'

This remark so stung Adrienne, and so forcibly reminded her of her own helplessness, that she could not possibly restrain tears from welling to her eyes, and a sob escaping from her lips. Noticing her emotion, he put out his hand and attempted to take hers, saying :

'A woman in tears is a pitiful sight. I would give thee comfort. Wherefore art thou sad ?'

She shrank from him and made answer :

'For myself I want not thy comfort nor thy pity.'

'And yet they are not to be despised,' he remarked pointedly.

'Perhaps not, by those who appreciate thee. But I do not.'

'Then, why hast thou come here ?' he asked as a dark frown clouded his brow, for his vanity was wounded.

'To plead for thy son.'

'I am not the Queen,' he said sarcastically.

'No ; but thou art his father.'

'And thou—and thou art his foster-mother, and in high favour with her Majesty.'

'No longer so,' Adrienne murmured, bursting into tears, so that she did not notice the smile of malignancy that came into his face.

'Ah, can that be possible ?' he exclaimed in seeming surprise, and yet there was something so forced in his manner that she looked at him fixedly through her tears, and asked :

'Wert thou in entire ignorance of it ?'

'Not quite,' he answered. 'Rumour had reached me, but the air now is thick with rumours, and one knows not what to believe.'

'Then take my confirmation of the rumour, and know that I am banished by her Majesty.'

'Banished !'

‘Even so, alas!’

‘By St. Agnes—but this is news indeed!’ he said with simulated sorrow. ‘And then, after a considerable pause, he asked: ‘What, then, is the errand that has brought thee to me?’

‘I come to claim thy influence on behalf of thine own flesh and blood.’

‘But François has been guilty of treason,’ he observed, watching her from the corner of his eyes.

‘And what of that?’ she asked with cutting severity. ‘He is a youth, and has been drawn into this sad business; and it is thy solemn and sacred duty to save him from the penalty of his folly, or at any rate to mitigate his punishment.’

‘Thou art attributing much power to me,’ he said.

‘The power to do what I know thou canst do, for the Queen has faith in thee, though mine in thee be dead.’

This was an unfortunate remark, as it placed a weapon in his hands which he did not fail to avail himself of.

‘I am glad you recognise my power,’ he said, with ill-concealed joy; ‘but sorry, in truth, to hear thee say that thou hast no faith. It was not always so.’

‘No; but then I knew thee not as I know thee now.’

‘Thou loved me once,’ he remarked in an insinuating tone.

‘I thought so.’

‘Thought so!’ he echoed.

‘Aye; but soon I found my error.’

‘No,’ he said, as a sinister expression came into his face, ‘that is not so, but another man came between me and thee.’

‘Thou speakest falsely and shamefully!’ she cried with great indignation, and then, checking herself, said: ‘But let us not quarrel. Thou hast power and influence. I come to pray thee to use them on behalf of thy son. I am going away, going by the Queen’s commands, but François remains. Thou must intercede for him and get him pardoned.’

‘And where goest thou?’ Renaud asked with considerable eagerness.

‘Alas! I know not. I go into exile to die of a broken heart.’

‘Thou must not die yet, and particularly of such a complaint as that,’ he said, drawing a little closer to her. ‘Between thee and me, at such a time as this, there should be no difference,’ he went on. ‘Thou hast come to me for help.

And thou art going into exile to die of a broken heart. The first I can give thee, the second I can prevent on—one condition.'

She looked up at him as he stood over her now with his head slightly bent towards her, and his hand so posed as to suggest that he wanted her to take it.

'What is the condition?' she asked, with palpitating heart, and knowing full well what the answer would be.

'That thou wilt become my wife,' he answered, dwelling upon each word.

She started up, backed away a little, and stood, in an attitude of scorn and indignation, facing him.

'Thou art a coward,' she said.

'For loving thee?' he put in ironically.

'No, for thou dost not love me; but for endeavouring to take advantage of my sad condition to force upon me an odious union.'

'Thou art frank at any rate, and that is something,' he said with a sneer. 'But listen. I have for years endeavoured to win thee and failed, and now that thou art helpless I offer thee help, and ask thee in return to become my wife. For this thou art polite enough to call me coward. But let me inquire if thou art able to help thyself without my assistance?'

'I plead for thy son,' she urged in a choking voice.

'Good. Thou hast affection for my son?'

'Mother never had more fervent love for her child than I have for him.'

'Then listen to me. I have known for some time of his traitorous designs, and I warned her Majesty, as it was my duty, even though that duty was against my own son. But I have not told her Majesty all, and, though I know not what punishment may be in store for him, I will promise thee this, that an I make known his further deeds his life will of a certainty be forfeit.'

Carried away by her feelings, and overcome by emotion, Adrienne threw herself on her knees before him, and wailed out in piteous accents:

'Oh, but thou wilt not, thou wilt not do this thing!'

He smiled triumphantly as he saw her kneeling to him. Then he turned towards the table, whereon stood a small gilt crucifix, such as was used by all Catholics. He lifted it up and said:

‘Look here. This is the holy symbol of our common faith. By it I solemnly vow and declare that an thou wilt not become my wife François die!’

As he uttered these words she gave vent to a scream, and fell prone on the floor. He stooped down, raised her, and placed her in a chair.

For some minutes she wept bitterly, during which he uttered no word, but stood watching her. Then at last she murmured:

‘Hast thou no pity?’

‘I am very full of pity,’ he answered. ‘It is thou who lackest it. Say, wilt thou save François?’

She moaned with mental anguish. She knew this man too well to doubt for a single moment that he would not hesitate to do what he threatened. Then her thoughts flew to Basile. He had confessed love for her, and she asked herself whether he could help her now in her dire extremity. Alas! the only answer her mind could frame was an emphatic ‘No.’ How could he? she thought. He had no power: his position was too humble. Love her he did, of that she was sure; and he would lay his life down to serve her, but that was of no use if he could not save the life of François.

Tortured in her mind with these reflections, and seeing no hope, turn her eyes which way she would, save in this man whom she despised, she resolved to sacrifice herself for François’s sake; and so, in sad tones of despair and heartfelt pain, she said:

‘An thou wilt give me a pledge that not a hair of François’s head shall be injured, I will promise to become thy wife.’

‘My pledge is here,’ he said, laying his hand once more on the crucifix. ‘I swear it by this symbol.’

‘Then what wouldst thou have me do?’ she asked sadly.

‘Thou must leave the palace as her Majesty has so ordered,’ he answered, feeling very anxious to get her away from Basile’s influence, for he still dreaded him. ‘Thou must go into hiding, and by to-morrow I will have secured quarters for thee.’

‘And what of François?’ she asked eagerly.

‘Leave him to me. I promise thee he shall be restored to the Queen’s favour.’

‘When I am assured of that, and not till then, will I become thy wife,’ she answered.

‘The condition is a fair one; I accept it.’

He seemed disposed to embrace her, but she hurriedly rose to escape it, and said :

‘I am weary and sick at heart. I will to my chamber, and to-morrow will await thy instructions.’

She held forth her hand and allowed him to kiss it. Then he opened the door and she passed out, and as he turned back into his room he rubbed his hands gleefully, and laughing aloud, said to himself :

‘Renaud, thy patience is rewarded. Thou hast won at last.’

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE MOTHER LOVE.

ADRIENNE DE BOIS felt that she had offered herself up as a living sacrifice on François’s behalf, and that therefore she had a right to exact from him certain pledges as to his future. In deciding to give herself up to Renaud, she proved her utter unselfishness and the great depth of her affection. Not affection for Renaud, she was too painfully aware that between her and him there could be nothing of the kind. Basile had cautioned her against him, and said that if she became his wife he would only wreck her life and break her heart. Although she knew quite well that Basile was consumed with jealousy and hated Renaud, and that in consequence he would not hesitate to depict him in the blackest colours, she, nevertheless, had seen too much of Renaud’s nature to be able to doubt that the Jester’s accusation contained a very large measure of truth. For all that she knew, he might or might not be an impostor in the sense that Basile meant, but that he bore her not an atom of love she was perfectly convinced, so that his object in desiring her to become his wife was a base, mean, selfish, and sordid one ; and when a man is actuated by a motive so utterly contemptible, the woman who links her fate to his can expect nothing but abject misery. She had frequently heard Renaud express his craving for wealth. She possessed a very considerable fortune, so that she did not deceive herself by even trying to suppose that he wished to possess her for any other reason than as a means of obtaining control of her riches.

With heavy heart she sought her foster-son, and found him

BASILE THE JESTER

scarcely less depressed than she was herself. The terribly tragic scene to which^d he had been a witness, and in which he had played a subordinate part, had made a deep impression upon him, and his youthful face wore such a despondent look that it gave him the appearance of being haggard and careworn, and consequently much older than he really was.

‘François, I am going away,’ she said, as she embraced him fervently.

‘It were better so,’ he responded in choking accents, and not fully realizing the true meaning of her words. ‘Here there is nothing but danger and sorrow, and thou, so gentle and sweet, art unfitted to live in an atmosphere of conspiracy and murder. Therefore thou dost well to seek for peace and comfort elsewhere.’

She did not attempt to interrupt him, although she instantly saw that he was under a wrong impression. But when he had finished, she answered :

‘Ah, my beloved boy, thou dost not understand. It is not of my free will that I go, but by the stern commands of her Majesty the Queen.’

‘Thou art banished, dost mean to say ?’ he cried in alarm.

‘Even so,’ she replied.

‘Alas ! alas !’ he moaned, covering his face with both his hands ; ‘can it be possible that thou, who art all goodness, hast to suffer for my sins ?’

‘Thou hast been foolish,’ she said, ‘and my going may be indirectly attributable to thee, dear François. But I have no reproaches, only love for thee, and I fain would hope that my punishment will be thy gain, and that by unswerving fidelity to her Majesty thou wilt not only be able to mitigate her severity, but succeed in reinstating me in her Grace’s favour.’

‘By Heaven, I will do so or perish !’ he cried with passion ; but then suddenly remembering that his conduct had been such that in the event of the Queen coming back he could expect no mercy, he added sadly : ‘Alas, I am forgetting that I am a culprit, and cannot escape from paying a heavy penalty.’

‘Culpable thou art, child,’ she said tenderly, ‘drawing his head to her bosom, and smoothing his curls back from his forehead ; ‘but thy youth will excuse thee, and thy father has promised to save thee from any consequences of thy acts and deeds.’

'My father!' cried François, starting up in disgust; 'I will accept no favour from his hands. He is a treacherous knave!'

'Shame on thee, boy!' cried Adrienne angrily. 'Thou art his son, and art not justified in using such terms to the author of thy being. The son who respects not his parents can have respect for no one else.'

François was abashed. Not but what in his own mind he was convinced that his father was treacherous, for had he not counselled him to renew his connection with Lilian in spite of the Queen's command, and that counsel was the means of his having broken his pledge to the Queen and proved false to his allegiance. Knowing this, he would have had to have been a far duller youth than he was, had he failed to infer from his father's conduct that that father had wilfully led him astray either to purposely bring him into disgrace or to serve some private interests. Between Renaud's professions and Renaud's acts the boy saw that there was a wide discrepancy, and that discrepancy could only be explained by describing it as treachery. But, nevertheless, François's quick perception enabled him to readily see that it were wiser far to keep his thoughts about Renaud to himself, for by giving expression to them, and in the absence of proof, he could not fail to pain Adrienne, for whom he bore the greatest affection. And so, in answer to her remark, he said meekly:

'Thy rebuke is merited, sweet mother. I am hasty of speech, but will try to cure the fault. But tell me, now, where goest thou? for where thou goest I go too.'

'No, dear,' she said, 'thou hast duties here; solemn duties that thou must not evade. The Queen needs faithful followers, and thou wilt be faithful evermore. Besides, thou canst best serve thine own interests and mine by remaining.'

'Thou art always right,' he answered, as he caressed her, 'and by thee will I be guided.'

Adrienne was much comforted by this expression of his resolution, believing, of course, that he would adhere to it, and that the compact she had made with Renaud would save François from the Queen's anger. She did not tell the boy of this compact, for secretly she felt ashamed of it; and, moreover, she deemed it highly probable that he would strongly oppose it, and so bring down Renaud's wrath upon his own head as well as on hers.

'To-morrow,' she said, 'I take my departure. Already

there are rumours that her Majesty is raising a powerful army, and will speedily return to punish those who have deceived her. Thou hast nothing to fear, for all thy father's influence will be exerted on thy behalf. For myself, it is imperative that I go. But thou shalt receive frequent news of my whereabouts, and we will meet again soon. Thy father will arrange that.'

Her last words aroused some suspicion in François's mind, and he asked quickly :

'Hast thou placed thyself in my father's power?' His manner and tone were sufficient to assure her that if he knew the facts he would oppose them, whatever the cost might be to himself, and therefore, as it was to save him that she was making the sacrifice, she endeavoured to allay his suspicion, and with a forced smile she answered :

'No, dear, I have not placed myself in his power; but knowing that it is to our advantage not to offend him, I have sought his advice, and am willing to be guided by him.'

François was not deceived by this specious statement. He would indeed have been blind during the past years if he had failed to see that Renaud had manifested a desire to marry Adrienne; and he would have been no less obtuse if he had not gathered during those years, from many signs, that this desire was not reciprocated by her. But still he deemed it wise now, remembering what his own position was, not to mention either his fears or his suspicions, but he resolved to lose no time in endeavouring by some means or other to discover what the connection was between Adrienne and his supposed father. He merely remarked, in answer to what she had said, and laying great stress upon his words :

'For my sake, good mother, an thou lovest me, do nothing in haste.'

'I will not,' she said, gathering something of his meaning. Then, making arrangements to see him on the morrow, she embraced him warmly, and went away to prepare for her departure.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE JESTER MAKES A REVELATION.

ADRIENNE resolved, though the resolve cost her many a bitter pang, that she would not only keep secret from Basile the fact that she had promised Renaud to become his wife, but to leave the palace without seeing the poor Jester again. She dare not trust herself to have an interview with him; and thinking that his feeling for her would soon die when she had gone, she considered it wise so far as she was concerned, and positive kindness to him, to avoid a further meeting.

This, then, was her intent, but human plans and actions do not always take the bent that people wish them to have. They more often than not seem directed by fate or destiny, whatever one likes to call it, which is quite beyond human control. Adrienne was to prove the truth of this, for in her calculations she overlooked one important factor, and that factor was François. The lad pondered deeply upon the words his foster-mother had used, and the more he pondered the more the significance of the words struck him.

If she had placed herself under Renaud's guidance, what did it mean if it did not mean that he had gained an influence over her? François was not ignorant of the craving Renaud had for wealth, and the lad was shrewd enough to guess that his supposed father aimed at possessing Adrienne's fortune. If Adrienne had loved him, that would have been another thing; but François knew differently, and that his foster-mother had a positive aversion to Renaud.

'I must save Adrienne,' he said to himself; but having said it, he saw not how to go beyond the saying, until, feeling in a quandary and very unhappy, he bethought him in his dilemma of Basile the Jester.

From his coming to the Court on that memorable day when his unfortunate mother had been crushed to death beneath the hoofs of a horse, on the occasion of the marriage of the Dauphin of France, up to the present, François had found in Basile something more than a friend. In his childhood the buffoon amused him, played with him, rode him on his broad shoulders, and manifested a watchful and loving regard for him. That regard had never altered, and the lad had come

to look upon Basile as his confidant and adviser, and went to him whenever he was in trouble. Now, there was another remarkable circumstance which had not failed to impress François and often set him wondering, and it was that Basile always evinced a strange dislike for Renaud, and always referred to him with manifest feelings of bitterness and disgust. Much struck with this, he one day asked Basile, 'Dost thou not like my father?'

And the Jester had answered, with suppressed passion displaying itself in his flashing eyes and quivering lips: 'If thou meanest Renaud—no. He is a sort of human wolf. He preys upon his fellow men and women in order to gratify his own insatiable greed.'

'Thou hast perhaps suffered injury at his hands?' François had remarked, noticing how bitterly the Jester spoke.

'Ay, boy,' was the reply, 'a deadly injury.'

François thereupon sought to learn the nature of the injury, but Basile would tell him nothing, merely saying that some day perhaps he would learn.

François never again referred to the subject, being content to wait for what time might bring forth. Nor was it at all unnatural that the youth's affections should incline rather to Basile than to Renaud; for the latter always seemed so selfish and harsh, while the Jester was always as gentle and kindly as he was unselfish. The fool, in fact, had been the boy's playmate and companion, and knowing nothing whatever about Basile's feelings for Adrienne, François in his difficulty went to him now.

The Jester had been suffering from an illness during several days, and, in consequence, had been confined to his lodgings, and therefore had seen nothing of the stirring events consequent on Rizzio's murder, though, of course, he had heard of them from a variety of sources.

He welcomed François with every manifestation of delight, and in compliance with his request, François gave him all the details of the ghastly drama that had been enacted in her Majesty's chamber.

It has been said that the youth was in the habit of making the Jester his confidant in most things, but there was one thing he had kept from him, and that thing was his connection with Lilian. His motive for keeping this back was a very strong one. Basile was a staunch, in fact, a fanatical,

Catholic, and the lad was quite sure that he would have counselled him very strongly to avoid the fair daughter of the fanatical Bomcester. And, feeling so sure of this, François had kept his wooing a secret from his friend. But now, in his great trouble, the lad told Basile everything, even to the part he had played in the conspiracy.

The Jester listened in evident pain, and his face betrayed how deeply he was affected.

‘And her Majesty knows all this?’ he exclaimed, with great anxiety, when the recital was finished.

‘Her Majesty knows that I haven’t kept faith with her,’ François answered, with some prevarication.

‘Alas, François! thou hast brought thyself into grave condition, and much I fear me thou wilt suffer severely,’ said Basile, evidently distressed.

‘I have been very foolish, I own,’ answered François, ‘but I would fain hope that my offence is not so rank that it cannot be forgiven. Leastways, my father says that he can gain the Queen’s clemency.’

‘Says he so?’ exclaimed the Jester, with a scowl.

‘Ay.’

‘An he does that I may forgive him much,’ Basile remarked thoughtfully. ‘But I have my doubts,’ he added. ‘If I know aught of Renaud, and methinks I do, he bears thee little of a father’s love.’

‘So thou hast always maintained,’ François remarked.

‘Hast thou not proved it?’ Basile asked quickly.

‘Truth to tell, I have.’

‘So then I am not deceived,’ said Basile, with a bitter smile. ‘Still, he hath promised to screen thee from the anger of the Queen, and that is something to be thankful for.’

‘He has not promised me in person, but dear Mademoiselle Adrienne, my good foster-mother, has won his influence.’

‘Thy foster-mother!’ cried Basile in a raspy voice, and growing suddenly pale. ‘How has she won his influence? Tell me quick!’

‘It is of that I came to speak,’ François said, not failing to notice Basile’s eagerness. ‘Thou art aware, mayhap, that my father desires to gain Adrienne for his wife?’

‘Well, well,’ exclaimed the Jester with great impatience; ‘has she accepted him?’

‘I know not, by my faith; but there is something atween them. Tell me, Basile, dost think she loves him?’

The Jester’s face was bloodless, and he was so agitated that for some moments he could not speak. Then, with passionate fierceness that startled the boy, he exclaimed:

‘Dost the lamb love the wolf that rends it? Thy foster-mother *hates* Renaud!’

‘How know you that?’ asked the boy quickly, and in some surprise.

‘By a hundred things. But there, there, tell me what said she. Has she told thee anything?’

‘Ay. To-morrow she leaves, by the Queen’s order, for she, too, hath fallen into disgrace.’

The Jester pressed his hand to his forehead and moaned. ‘Go—go on; tell me more,’ he said in a voice of bitter despair.

François was amazed. Then, as a thought flashed through his brain, he asked bluntly:

‘Basile, dost thou love my foster-mother?’

‘Seek not to know now, boy,’ Basile answered, with a great sigh. ‘But thou hast left something untold. Let me hear it.’

‘It is this, Basile. Good Adrienne, ever mindful of wicked me, came to my chamber to bid me not despair, since my father had pledged himself to get the Queen’s pardon.’

‘Said she so? Tell me—tell me, an thou canst, the very words in which she spoke.’

‘Ay. She said that her going away was indirectly attributable to me, but she had no reproaches, only love.’

‘The saints love *her*!’ Basile murmured with great fervour.

‘I asked her if she had placed herself in my father’s power.’

‘And what said she to that?’ exclaimed the Jester.

‘Her answer was, an my memory serves me, these very words: “I have not placed myself in his power; but knowing that it is to our advantage not to offend him, I have sought his advice, and am willing to place myself under his guidance.”’

Basile groaned.

‘There is treachery at work,’ he said. Then, with passionate energy, he seized François’s hand, and in a half-commanding, half-supplicating tone he exclaimed: ‘Boy, thou hast little love for Renaud, and much for Adrienne, who hast given thee a mother’s love and tenderness. For thy sake she would sell herself body and soul. But it must not be—it

must not be. We should be base, cowardly dogs an we permitted ft. Better that Renaud should die—ay, a hundredfold better!’

‘But dost thou forget, Basile,’ said François, ‘that Renaud is my father?’

The Jester seemed to be undergoing a process of mental torture, and his face betrayed the keenness of his suffering. He turned away for some moments as if he could not quite make up his mind what to do. Then, with sudden energy, he faced François again, and cried in a voice broken with emotion:

‘I will save thee and her, though my life may pay the penalty. And know this now, for it is time you learned the truth—*Philip Renaud is not thy father!*’

CHAPTER XXXI.

DOES LIGHT BREAK IN UPON THEE NOW?’

FRANÇOIS fairly reeled at this revelation, and it explained to him many things that had hitherto been as mysteries. So great was his amazement that at first he could only gasp out:

‘Not my father?’

‘No. Thou art amazed, and well thou mayst be; yet what I have now made known to thee is Heaven’s truth.’

‘But—but say, Basile, how long hast thou known this?’

‘For many a long year. Ever since he came to the palace in Paris.’

‘And why hast thou kept the matter secret?’

‘Ah, the knowledge of that thou must forego, at least for the present.’

‘But wherefore?’ the boy asked with pained eagerness.

‘There are strong reasons, and not the least of them, maybe, is thine own welfare and thine own safety. Thou hast been deceived for years, but be deceived no longer. It can be no wrench to thy affection to suddenly find that he whom thou hast been taught to call by the name of father has no claim upon thee. For, as I read thee right, thou hast little love for him, and I will stake my poor soul that he has none for thee.’

‘I am bewildered and staggered,’ said François thought-

fully, 'but somehow not disappointed. Between me and Renaud there has been little in common. But, Basile, an thou lovest me, tell me, an thou canst do so, who *is* my father?'

'Listen, boy,' said the Jester, speaking solemnly and slowly, as though fully impressed with a consciousness of the import of the question. 'If thou hast any regard for thy peace of mind, seek not to know.'

'Thou hast cognizance of my father, then?'

'I have.'

'Then, wherefore dost thou not place me in possession of the knowledge?' said François, in evident distress.

'Because I love thee.'

'That surely is a poor reason.'

'Nay, it is an all-potent one. And it is for thy good that I withhold the information.'

'By the Mass, Basile, but thou art giving me a riddle that I find no answer for. Nay, an it were merely for the gratification of my curiosity thou shouldst tell me, but there is a more cogent reason than that. I did not grow like a weed. I am my father's son. Thou hast vowed solemnly that Renaud is not my father, and I believe it; but who is my father?'

'Again I say thou shalt not know,' said Basile with force and energy.

'Shalt not know?'

'Ay, those were my words.'

'Basile,' cried François, with suppressed irritation, 'an I loved thee not as I do, I would try to wring the secret from thee.'

'And thou wouldst fail,' answered the Jester sternly.

'Well, as thou wilt,' said the lad, shrugging his shoulders. 'But mayhap an I knew him he would be ashamed of me or I of him,' he added with covert spitefulness.

'Therein art thou right. Thou wouldst be ashamed of him,' Basile said.

'He is a knave, mayhap,' remarked François, feeling a little piqued at the Jester's reticence.

'Mayhap so,' was the answer.

'Or it might hap that he is a fool,' François added with a sneer upon his handsome face.

'Verily he may be a fool,' said Basile in reply, 'but let us not waste time in these useless quibbles. I have told thee a startling truth, that Renaud is not thy father. Thou owest

him no duty and no allegiance; and henceforth thou canst think of him with the scorn he merits. Some day, and that day may come soon, I will give thee some particulars of thy parents. But now my lips are sealed.'

Although François was very naturally burning to know the secret of his birth, for it was obvious there was some mystery about it, he very wisely determined to refrain from questioning Basile further then. But while in this respect he felt disappointed and even irritated, on the other hand he rejoiced exceedingly that between him and Renaud there was no tie. It was an exceeding great puzzle to him why Renaud should have wanted to claim him for his son, while his own father had apparently disowned him. He had long regarded Renaud, even while having no suspicion that he was not his parent, with feelings very far from those which a son usually bears. Renaud himself, by his selfishness and unconcealed deceit, had alienated the boy's affection, so that now when he discovered that he was not his son he was elated in a way that he had not been for a long time, and he experienced a sense of intense bitterness mingled with disgust.

'Thou hast done me a great service, good Basile,' he said, 'since thou hast relieved me of the necessity of any longer doing outrage to my feelings by professing to have love for a man towards whom I see full well now I have borne only hatred. Master Renaud has played some cunning game; but now that I know him for a knave, he will play his game no longer with me.'

'That is well said,' answered the Jester; 'but have caution, for Renaud is cunning as the fox, as deadly as the serpent. It was only by claiming thee as his son that he was enabled to come to the court. On the day that the Queen was married to the Dauphin of France, thy poor mother was killed by an accident.'

'So much have I learnt from Adrienne,' said François sadly, as the Jester paused as if some emotion had overcome him. But he recovered himself, and went on:

'On that day Renaud discovered by some chance the story of thy birth, and coming to the court he avowed himself the husband of the woman who had been killed, and consequently thy father. The dear Queen retained him, and gave thee into the charge of Adrienne de Bois. Does light break in upon thee now?'

'Ay, Basile, in God's good name, I vow it does,' cried François in great distress, as he clearly recognised how ungrateful he had been to the Queen. 'And that same light reveals to me, until I quiver with pain, that her Majesty has done much for me, while I have repaid the debt with traitorous conduct.'

'The future lies before thee,' Basile remarked with great earnestness; 'go thy ways into it with honest heart and stern resolution to be faithful to the Queen's Majesty, and some day thou mayest succeed in bringing back her regard for thee. But now thou hast to fear her wrath, and she returns, as who can doubt she will? She has been betrayed and wronged, and those who have done this thing will wither before the scorching fires of her just anger. Sweet Adrienne de Bois must know and think that thou art in sore straits, or never would she have offered to sacrifice herself by accepting Renaud's guidance in order that thou might be saved. Adrienne de Bois shall make no such sacrifice. Though, should she fail to keep her word to him, Renaud's spite will expend itself on thee; and mark me well, he would be glad to see thee fall. But thou and Adrienne must foil him by flight.'

'By flight?'

'Ay. It is the only way.'

'But what of Adrienne? Will she consent?' François queried in some alarm.

'I think she will. Go thou to her and say nothing to her but this, that I, Basile, crave her, by the holy saints, to see me for a brief space. And she would save my life, bid her do this. And stay, thou wilt want gold on thy journey.' Weak from his illness, and unsteady through excitement, he tottered across the apartment, opened a drawer, and took therefrom a small bag of money. 'Nay, take it!' he cried piteously, as François at first refused it. 'What care I for money? Thy life and her life are at stake. Get thee to England, and when thou hast found a refuge send me letters that I may know where thou art, and give thee in return information of myself. As soon as it has grown dark thou must away with Adrienne, and be far on thy journey before thy flight is known. I will see that thou hast horses. Geoffrey, the tapster, in the Market-place, is a very worthy friend of mine, and is to be trusted, for I have done him some service. Thither thou and Adrienne shall go with a sign from me, and

he will give thee horses and start thee on thy journey. Now, get thee to Adrienne quick, and fail not to prevail on her to see me.'

He had spoken very rapidly and excitedly, giving François no chance of making any remark, but fairly pushed him out of the room, and when he had gone the sick and jaded Jester shot the bolt of his door, and, throwing himself on his pallet, wept like a tired child.

CHAPTER XXXII.

WITH HIDEOUS JOY OF TRIUMPHANT MALICE.

FRANÇOIS'S brain was all in a whirl. The exciting events of the last few days were quite enough to make any man bewildered, but, in addition to these, the youth had just heard a startling revelation which closely concerned himself. It had been made so suddenly and unexpectedly that his breath was fairly taken away, and his thoughts were confused and tangled. But, nevertheless, he had very clearly gathered from the plan that Basile had hastily shadowed forth that it offered safety for himself and Adrienne, and so, in compliance with the Jester's request, he hurried to her to deliver his message. She received it with mingled feelings. She was pleased and displeased. Pleased because it suggested to her a means of escape from an odious connection—for what else could a marriage with Renaud have been? and she was displeased because she was not quite sure whether it would really be to François's interest to go away; in the Queen's sight such a course might only tend to magnify his fault, and make her Majesty's pardon more difficult to obtain.

François, noticing that she wavered, decided her by saying very emphatically:

'Know this, sweet mother, I will die before I will be beholden to Renaud for one straw's worth of favour. And sooner than that thou shouldst become his victim, I—I would kill him, or may I never more break bread!'

'Hush!' she said reprovingly. 'Such threats do not become thee. He is thy father.'

'He is no——' François began, and was going to say, 'He is no father of mine.' But he suddenly checked himself, thinking

that the moment and circumstances were not opportune to tell Adrienne that he himself was a nonentity, a 'nameless nothing; a waif of shame it might be. He was a proud boy, and the hot blood surged to his temples at the thought, so he took Adrienne's reproach meekly, and held his peace. After some struggling with herself, she at last decided to grant Basile's request and see him. But then came the question, How was it to be done? Intrigue and suspicion reigned supreme in the place, and everyone was a spy on everyone else's movements. The Queen's friends were in the majority, and, cat-like, they watched for the smallest sign that should indicate what was going on amongst her enemies. To stir in what seemed to be a secret or mysterious manner was sufficient not only to bring one's self under suspicion, but to run the risk of instant arrest, and probably gross ill treatment, if not assassination. Men's passions were inflamed, and their blood ran hot, and those who were staunch to her Majesty were nervously restless, and burning to avenge the wrongs and the insults that had been put upon her. About a dozen of these friends, including Philippe Renaud, had formed themselves into a committee, and had assumed control of affairs in the palace for the time being. They had issued the most stringent orders, and threatened drastic measures if these orders were not complied with; and as showing the lengths to which they were prepared to resort, they had summarily executed a soldier for laxity of duty while on guard. Every entrance and exit was strictly watched, and a cordon of trusty sentries was drawn round the palace.

Now, Adrienne was well aware of all this, she saw how imperatively necessary caution was, though she would have been more deeply impressed with this idea had she been aware that she was being specially watched on behalf of Renaud.

Notwithstanding she had promised to become his wife, he still entertained doubts about her, and was morbidly suspicious of his old enemy, Basile the Jester. He hated the man with an intensity of hatred that is indescribable, and knowing that Basile could at any moment unmask him, he felt that this was an opportunity not to be missed for ridding himself of this standing menace once and for all. And so he resolved to himself that if he could only get the shadow of an excuse for impeaching Basile as a traitor, and a danger to the peace of the palace, he would have him hanged instantly, and with a

view to this end he had deputed his creature Bastian to watch Adrienne and Basile with never-ceasing vigilance.

Adrienne thought over many schemes for obtaining an interview with Basile, but it seemed to her that there was not a spot in all the palace where she could see him with safety save in her own chamber. Consequently, she despatched a message to him to that effect by François, with instructions that he was to use the utmost caution. A little later in the day the Jester stole from his quarters and made his way stealthily to Adrienne's room, but not, unfortunately, without having been seen by the lynx eyes of Bastian the page, who hurried off to inform his master that Basile had been admitted to Adrienne's private chamber.

'I have gratified thy desire to see me, Basile,' she said nervously; 'but in doing this I am running great risk. Therefore, it is well that thou shouldst be brief.'

He knelt on one knee, took her hand and kissed it. Then rising, stood before her with bowed head, and made answer: 'Mademoiselle Adrienne, I am thy slave. Thou art in peril, and I, thy slave, will save thee. Renaud hath cast his evil shadow over thee, and it were better far, ay, infinitely better, that thou shouldst be wrapped in the shadow of Satan. Adrienne, I caution thee to avoid Philippe Renaud as thou wouldst the Black Death.'

'Be not tedious, good Basile, but to the point,' said Adrienne nervously.

'Ah, Mademoiselle Adrienne, pity me,' Basile murmured pathetically, inferring from her words that she was angry with him and inclined to favour his rival. She was moved, and feeling sorry for having wounded him by a lightly spoken remark, said tenderly:

'Basile, thou hast my pity, if that is what thou desirest. Indeed thou hast more than that: thou hast my true regard.'

He seized her hand, and, bending towards her in an attitude of expectancy and intense eagerness, he peered into her half-averted face, and exclaimed:

'Have I thy love also?'

She was much distressed. She did not want to commit herself on the one hand, nor to wound his feelings on the other; and so, gently drawing back, she said softly:

'Thou hast won my admiration, and some day, mayhap, I will prove that I am not ungrateful.'

He was not quite satisfied with the answer, and yet the admission that he had won her admiration was much to a man who loved as ardently as he did. He knew that it was no time for bandying words. He loved this woman, and whether she did or would love him was not the point then. He wished to prevent her falling a prey to Renaud, and to place her and François in safety until happier times dawned. So he said :

‘Thy admiration, Mademoiselle Adrienne, is much to be thankful for. Thy love I will pray may come. But now listen. Thou must foil Renaud, and François must place the barrier of distance between himself and the angered Queen. Thou wilt go with him. He will be a protector for thee, and thou wilt watch over him. In the market-place dwells one Geoffrey, a tapster. He is a worthy man, and has had some service from me. His house beareth the sign of Ye Lion. I will to him at once, and order that at nine of the clock to-night he hath horses ready to carry thee and François to England. ‘Thou must make all speed to cross the border, and when thou art in safety François will send me information.’

‘And about thyself?’ cried Adrienne, displaying great anxiety, which did not escape Basile’s notice.

‘Thou art kind to think of me,’ he said, with a pleased expression. ‘But have no fear, I shall be safe; and when I know where thou art I will send thee news.’

Adrienne heard his proposition with a sense of relief and joy, for it offered her the means of escaping from Renaud, and as long as François was with her she knew that he would be safe.

‘I place myself in thy hands,’ she said.

‘Good!’ he answered. ‘Hold thyself in readiness. I will make preparations for thy flight, and at the hour of nine I will come to thy chamber and conduct thee out of the palace. Should I not be able to go with thee to Ye Lion, thou wilt make thy way thither with all speed. For the rest, God guide thee and protect thee. Till to-night, farewell.’

She was greatly moved by his tender solicitude, and stretched forth her hand to him. He kissed it. Then looking into her eyes, and seeing encouragement there, he yielded to an impulse, and for the first time touched her lips with his.

She offered no resistance, and displayed no surprise. Then he released her, and cautiously she opened the door to allow

him to depart. But no sooner had she done so than she uttered a shrill cry of despair, for facing her was Renaud, his face lighted up with the hideous joy of triumphant malice, and behind him were a number of armed men.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

HOW THE LAMB DECEIVED THE WOLF.

THE sudden shock to Adrienne's nerves on beholding Renaud almost caused her to faint, but by a desperate effort she controlled herself, though her heart nearly came to a stand-still as she recognised that she and Basile had been caught in a trap. Renaud saw her distress, and he absolutely rejoiced thereat.

'So, Mademoiselle Adrienne,' he said, with an ironical sneer, 'this is the way you respect me and regard your honour.' Then, turning to the men, he said sternly: 'Soldiers, seize that dog!' meaning Basile. Instantly four men-at-arms stepped forward and laid their hands on the Jester. He offered no resistance; but stood erect, proudly defiant and scornful. He knew that resistance would be madness. In fact, it would have been playing into the hands of his enemy, who would have been glad of an excuse to order his men to kill him.

Adrienne, however, could not remain passive while this was going on, and burning with indignation at the outrage, for so she regarded it, she exclaimed:

'Monsieur Renaud, thou art exceeding thy duty, and taking upon thyself a power to which thou hast no claim! Release that man; for thou hast no warrant to arrest him!'

'Oh, oh!' cried Renaud, with a coarse laugh, 'thou art strangely in error, and thy mad passion for this human dog has blinded thee to common-sense. Thou knowest well that thou thyself hast the Queen's orders to quit her palace. In what way thou hast offended the Queen's majesty I know not; but thou hast now brought thyself under the gravest suspicion in consenting to hold private interviews with this arrant knave. The times are too full of danger, and plots against her Majesty's peace are too rife to allow such things to pass unnoticed. Nay, I should be wanting in loyal duty to my sovereign and I re-

mained indifferent to this conduct. I know not what measure of guilt may be thine ; that shall be discovered later.' But I do know that this knave is dangerous to the Queen's happiness, and is plotting against her. Remove him, men, and allow him not to escape on the peril of your lives. An he shows the slightest resistance cleave him to the ground, for vermin were better dead than living.'

Adrienne was almost stunned, and stood in a dazed way staring at Renaud. The Jester could not remain unmoved or unconcerned, for he knew only too well that his fate trembled in the balance. Although his hopes seemed wrecked, and all that he longed for utterly beyond his reach now, he did not despair altogether. That Renaud would attempt to have him secretly assassinated he felt perfectly sure, but still, he thought that he might yet succeed in baffling his inveterate foe. To have parleyed would have been utterly useless, to have threatened no less so, and so he wisely held his peace ; but the workings of his white face told the agony he was enduring, and as he was roughly dragged away he cast a pitiful and despairing look at the woman he loved dearer than life.

When he had gone, Renaud bade the rest of the soldiers retire. Then he closed the door and was alone with Adrienne. This aroused her to a sense of her terrible position. All seemed lost, and yet she resolved to die and to see those she loved die, rather than this man should triumph.

'Coward !' she hissed. 'Now art thou revealed in all thy baseness !'

'Mademoiselle Adrienne,' he answered sternly, 'such language sounds ill on thy tongue. I have long suspected that thou wert intriguing with the villain Basile, and this day has given me ample proof. He has ever stood between me and thee. Therefore he is my enemy and my rival, and I thank Heaven that at last I can deprive him of his sting and render him harmless.'

'Thou wouldst not dare to injure a hair of his head !' she cried with startling anger.

'Would not dare !' he exclaimed, with a cynical laugh. 'And wherefore would I not dare, Mademoiselle Adrienne ?'

'Because an thou injured him a terrible retribution would surely overtake thee. Heaven would never let thee escape.'

He laughed mockingly as he replied :

'I have no fear of Heaven's retribution since I have justice on my side. But even if it is otherwise let the retribution fall. I will triumph now, though I lose later. Thy partiality and preference for Basile serve but to render his fate the more sure; for it is man's nature to slay his enemies when he can, and a lover loses no chance of outwitting his rival. Therefore, Basile being at last in my power, his hours are numbered. Nay, start not, lady. It is disagreeable news to thee, but thou must bear with it. Thou hast promised to become my wife, and thou shalt keep that promise.'

'Never!' she hissed fiercely.

'Do not excite thyself, dear Adrienne,' he said with exasperating coolness. 'Thou hast a fit of the choler now, but it will soon pass away, and thy good sense will then show thee in which direction thy interests lie. Till thou art better I am content to wait; but a wilful woman must be watched, and I will, therefore, take care that thou dost not commit thyself to any such foolish position again as that in which I have now found thee. To-morrow I will provide lodgings for thee, and thou shalt be placed in safe keeping. It is good for thee that this should be so. For a woman who knows not how to protect her honour must have it protected for her.'

Adrienne was burning with indignation and almost choking with rage at the villain's cool insolence. But before she could make reply to him the door opened and François entered. He was approaching, when he saw Renaud and the soldiers planted outside of his foster-mother's door. Knowing too well the import of this he prudently beat a retreat, but ensconced himself behind a large statue that stood in a niche, and from whence he commanded a view of the corridor. He saw Basile dragged away and the rest of the soldiers depart, and then, knowing that Adrienne and Renaud were alone, he determined to appear on the scene and learn what was going on.

Adrienne uttered a little cry of relief when he entered, and he exchanged a significant glance with her. Renaud frowned, and was evidently disconcerted by the lad's unexpected entrance, and he asked sharply:

'What is thy business here, boy?'

'Nay, good father, be not angry,' François answered with assumed humility and respect. 'I came but to see my foster-mother, and expected not to find thee here. Sorry I am that I have intruded; but as thou wilt pardon me I would express

a hope that thy wooing goes well, for is it not fitting that my dear father and she who has been a mother to me should be united ?'

Adrienne gathered the meaning of François's words, and hope revived within her breast. While Renaud was quite deceived by the youth's apparent sincerity, and never dreaming, of course, that he was aware that there was no relationship between them, it suddenly occurred to him that instead of trying to terrify Adrienne into compliance with his wishes, he might cajole her, and make François an instrument to this end.

'By the rood,' he exclaimed, 'but thou hast rare intelligence, and I am proud of thee ! Thou hast heard, Adrienne, what thy foster-son's opinions are ?'

'I have,' she stammered, eyeing François askance.

'Well,' said Renaud expectantly, 'and has he weight with thee ?'

'An I thought he was sincere in his wish he might have weight,' she answered with assumed hesitancy.

'Nay, good mother,' cried the lad, 'canst thou doubt me ? An I had known before that my father was really anxious to win thee, I should long ago have espoused his cause.'

'It were better for thee, perhaps, that I did not wed him,' Adrienne murmured, with bowed head and an appearance of being bashfully confused.

'Better for me !' cried the boy, with a laugh of scorn, simulated of course. 'By the Virgin, sweet mother, thou art joking grimly. It were better for me, ten hundred thousand times, that thou shouldst be my father's wife. Thou lovest me and he loves me, and your loves conjoined and your interests linked will of a surety be better for me. Since it is clear that an you remain asunder my affection will be divided, and I must, of a necessity, incline more to the one side than the other.'

'By St. Agnes, but thou art a worthy son !' cried Renaud delightedly. 'Adrienne, what sayest thou now ?'

'I know not what to say,' she murmured, feeling that it was not wise to show too ready an acquiescence lest Renaud's suspicion should be aroused.

'Sire,' François said, 'an thou wouldst leave my good mother to me, I warrant me I bring her to thy side ; for I vow that I devoutly desire to see you united.'

Renaud appeared to hesitate for a moment or two, and he directed a piercing gaze to first one and then the other, but in neither face was there a sign of collusion or deception. In fact, Adrienne appeared faint and ill, and she begged piteously to be left alone, in order that she might compose herself, and recover from the fright into which events had thrown her. While François, knowing how much was at stake, and how great a knave Renaud was, met his gaze fearlessly, and succeeded in completely throwing him off his guard.

‘I will trust thee,’ said Renaud at last, ‘but come now to my chamber, for I would have further speech with thee, and Adrienne will do well to woo sleep, for she hath a tired look.’ He approached close to her, and, lowering his voice, said: ‘Thou wouldst do well to listen to François. To-morrow I will take thee to lodgings. In the meantime compose thyself.’

He withdrew, followed by François, who exchanged significant looks with Adrienne, who doubted not that he had some plan in his mind whereby he hoped to foil the machinations of Renaud.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

‘AN I AM NOT WITLESS I SAW “FOX” WRIT LARGE UPON HIS BROW.’

RENAUD went direct to his room, accompanied by François. They found a soldier waiting at the door. The man made a salute as Renaud came up, and said:

‘I have been waiting your honour’s coming. An it please you we would have orders for the disposal of our prisoner.’

‘Hast thou stowed him well?’ asked Renaud.

‘Ay, by the Mass we have. He is lodged in the Stone Chest.’

Renaud smiled. ‘That is good,’ he said. ‘Thou shalt receive warrant to-night for his further disposal. Go.’ The man was turning away, when Renaud cried out, as if a new idea had struck him. ‘Tell me? hast thou a good guard, captain?’

‘Beyond doubt, your honour.’

‘See to it,’ said Renaud significantly, ‘that thou art vigilant and faithful. Thou mayest go now.’

The man took his departure. The conversation had not been lost on François. He knew that the 'Stone Chest' was a very strong cell, built in one of the flanking towers of the wall that surrounded the grounds; and that the prisoner referred to was Basile.

Renaud and François entered the room. Bastian, the page, was stretched out on a wooden bench that occupied the recess of the bay-window. He was fast asleep.

'Thy servant, sire, is a faithful dog,' François remarked ironically, as he glanced at the sleeping page.

'Faithful and fond,' answered Renaud. 'Therein might my son take copy.'

'I yield not to Bastian, father, in my devotion to thee,' said François, laying emphasis on his words in order to give them more effect.

Renaud placed his hand on the lad's head, and looking into his eyes, remarked:

'That is a brave speech, an I could believe it were sincere——'

'Wherefore dost thou doubt, sire?'

'I know not. But listen; an thou wert staunch to me, we two might gain wealth, power, place.'

'I am thy son,' said François, inwardly shrinking a little at the hypocritical part he was compelled to play.

'And I am thy father,' answered Renaud. 'Father and son should be united.'

'And am I not united to thee?' the boy asked.

'I fain would hope so.'

'Put me to the test.'

Renaud suddenly became very thoughtful, and he walked up and down the room for a few minutes, during which François noticed that Bastian opened his eyes, but instantly closed them again. Renaud stopped abruptly, and facing François, said:

'I will give thee a test. Thou shalt kill Basile the Jester.'

François started visibly, and all the colour fled from his face. With a desperate effort, however, he recovered himself, and forcing a smile, made answer:

'Sire, that is a grim jest.'

'By my faith it is no jest, but grim earnest,' said Renaud with warmth.

'Then, sire,' said François proudly, 'I shall refuse the test.'

'Why?' This sharply and sternly.

'For the reason that I am no assassin. For such work it is better that thou shouldst hire a cut-throat.'

A cold smile played round Renaud's mouth, and there was a sinister expression in his eyes as he remarked :

'Thou art right, boy. Let the subject pass. But I'll give thee another test. Persuade thy foster-mother to become my wife to-morrow night. I will find lodgings for her in the town, and a priest shall be in waiting to perform the ceremony. Come, now, prove thy love for me in this matter. Thou hast powerful influence over Adrienne, and she will grant thy wishes.'

'Now, then, thou hast set me a task that is to my liking,' cried François ; 'and I'll promise thee, sire, that with my supplications I'll so play upon Adrienne's feelings that she will give her consent. But I make a condition.'

'Name it,' said Renaud gaily.

'Thou must give Basile his liberty again.'

François's object in saying this was to probe Renaud, and endeavour to find out his intentions with reference to the Jester. He watched Renaud's face, and saw it darken with malice and hatred. And Renaud himself, forgetting for a moment the caution and diplomacy which generally marked his actions, exclaimed fiercely :

'Thou art a fool ; Basile is my deadly enemy, and my rival. For years he has thwarted me, and I hate him. Chance at last has placed his life in my hands, and ere many hours have sped my measure of revenge shall be complete.'

François had succeeded beyond his expectation, and he had completely laid bare Renaud's designs, and there could no longer be a doubt that poor Basile was doomed to be secretly put out of the way unless some means could be found to save him. Renaud, on his part, saw that he had committed himself, and bitterly regretted that he so allowed his feelings of hatred to betray him. But he was almost reassured, when François said :

'An he is so dangerous an enemy, self-interest will justify thee in securing thine own safety.'

'Now, then, thou art my noble son, and I am proud of thee,' exclaimed Renaud joyfully. 'All will yet be well. Influence Adrienne as I have requested, and I pledge myself thou shalt have Lilian for thy bride, and I will place thee high in the Queen's favour again.'

Doing outrage to his feelings, but fully determined to

deceive Renaud and throw him off his guard, François bent one knee and kissed Renaud's hand, that being the pledge of filial love and devotion. And he said :

'I thank thee. Now am I happy indeed. I will to Adrienne, at once. And unless I have lost my power of persuasion over her, she shall be thine to-morrow.'

He did not wait to hear Renaud's reply, for he dared not trust himself to say more, lest he should betray the disgust and contempt he really felt, and which up to that moment he had succeeded in so admirably concealing. He therefore hurried from the room, and for some moments Renaud stood looking after him with a self-satisfied grin upon his face. Then he turned towards Bastian, who was sitting bolt upright now, and said :

'Bastian, what thinkst thou of yon lad ?'

'No more than I think of the devil, an it please you, master.'

'How so, sirrah ?'

'Even because, an I am not witless, I saw "FOX" writ large upon his brow.'

'You mean that he is cunning ?' said Renaud quickly.

'The devil pinch me an you are not right, master.'

Renaud's face clouded over and was filled with trouble again.

He was full of faith in François a few moments ago ; now he doubted him. He bit his lip with suppressed anger, and he paced restlessly to and fro, stopping presently to say with some excitement in his tone and manner :

'Mayhap thou art right, though the lad can do me little harm. But, Bastian, thou art faithful as a sleuth-hound to me ?'

'Satan clutch me an I am not, master.'

'Good. Then thou must give me peace of mind. Every hour that Basile lives I am oppressed with deadly fear. He being dead, I should breathe freely and begin to live.'

'Give me thy commands, master,' said Bastian, as, rising, he shook himself much after the fashion of a dog, and his dark face was repulsive in its wickedness.

'Listen,' said Renaud. 'About ten of the clock to-night, when all have retired in the palace, thou shalt to the Stone Chest. I'll give thee a sign for the man-at-arms, and he'll admit thee. Thou wilt engage Basile in talk until, watching thy chance, thy poignard must find his heart. Am I clear ?'

'As a crystal river, good master.'

'So be it. But mark ye, Bastian, let thy blow be so aimed that it shall seem as if the fool hath done himself to death. Dost understand?'

'You shall dub me ass an I do not.'

'Bastian, thou art a treasure,' exclaimed Renaud, 'and thy intelligence doth honour to thy noble country. Then, this night thou wilt give me peace and happiness?'

'If to know that the Jester will shake his bells no more, and never again give one the belly-ache with his dull wit, will bring thee peace and happiness, then are these things assured to thee.'

As Bastian uttered the words his ever sinister face became more sinister, and his small dark eyes were afire with hatred and malice. He was an ill-favoured man, with a scowling expression and a pock-marked face. He was burly and broad-shouldered, with a something about him that was not at all calculated to beget the confidence of his fellow-men. He was by birth an Italian, but had travelled much, and had been a soldier. He had originally come to England as a servant in the suite of one of the Italian ambassadors. He had, however, been dismissed for misconduct, and had then made his way to Edinburgh, obtaining employment as a gardener at Holyrood. Subsequently he attracted the notice of Renaud, who made him his private servant, and *his creature*. Bastian was a knave at heart. Renaud soon discovered this, and moulded him to his will.

This plot between the two men, wicked and dastardly as it was, would in all probability have been carried to a successful issue, as only too many of such plots were, had it not been for the merest chance. When François was leaving the room some unaccountable impulse prompted him to linger between the heavy curtain that screened the doorway and the door itself, and thus it came about that he heard Renaud ask Bastian, 'What thinkst thou of yon lad?' and Bastian's answer, 'No more than I think of the devil.' François would have been a dullard, indeed, if from these few words he had not suspected that something more important might be gathered; so he listened and heard the whole plot for the assassination of Basile the Jester.

CHAPTER XXXV.

HOW THE FOWLER HIMSELF WAS SNARED.

UP to the moment that he had been enabled by chance to play the eavesdropper, François was at a loss what to do to save his friend Basile. To have appealed for justice to anyone in the palace would have been about as efficacious as to have appealed to the man in the moon. In point of fact the condition of affairs was little short of anarchy, and those who were powerful and able to command followers ruled for the time being. But hatred, jealousy, and uncharitableness displayed themselves in all their hideous nakedness, and despotic tyranny was exercised with unflinching cruelty. The boy was fully cognizant of all this, and felt sure that if he would save his friend he must rely upon himself. What he had now heard at once suggested a means, desperate it must be confessed, but they were desperate times and desperate things were being done every hour of every day; and therefore it did not do to stand upon nice points, and be delicate as to the course to pursue when villainy had to be foiled.

François's first step was to see Adrienne, but he did not inform her of what he had overheard. He simply told her that he had formed a plan by which he hoped to rescue Basile, and he bade her leave the palace, she being free to do that since it was known that the Queen had commanded her to depart. She was to make her way to Ye Lion, in the marketplace, and there wait until he and Basile joined her.

'But,' he added, 'shouldst thou find when morning light is dawning that we are still absent thou wilt ride away swiftly, and draw not rein until thou art well on thy way to Berwick.'

Adrienne smiled at this, but merely said :

'No, dear, I go not until thou art able to go with me.'

François knew it was no time for argument, and all he could do was to hope that the scheme he had in his mind might be successfully carried through. And so he left Adrienne, having exacted a solemn promise from her that she would leave the palace, secretly if possible, in order that Renaud might not come to know, but under any circumstances leave, and seek refuge for the time being with the tapster Geoffrey at Ye Lion.

This preliminary stage settled, François watched his opportunity to go to the so-called Stone Chest. The tower in which it was situated was, in fact, nothing more than a guardhouse, and the cell in question was used principally for refractory or drunken soldiers. But there had been times when prisoners of more importance had been confined there. It was an unusually strong prison-house. It was squarely built; the cell was lighted by three slits in the wall, heavily barred, and the door was massive oak, plated with iron. Escape, therefore, was practically impossible by anyone who had the misfortune to become an inmate, unless, of course, such escape was connived at. Now, connivance was exactly what François relied on. Fortunately for himself, he was a general favourite, and regarded with considerable interest, owing to his history and the knowledge that the Queen was very fond of him. He was thus allowed many privileges, and was enabled to do things that would not have been tolerated in others.

Two men-at-arms kept watch and ward at the door of the guardhouse in the cell of which Basile had been incarcerated. François knew both these men, and they on their part knew that he and Basile were great friends. Thus, then, there was a condition of things which was favourable to the prosecution of his scheme. • He approached the two soldiers, and, exhibiting great distress and pitiable anxiety, he exclaimed :

‘Alas ! alas ! you have my poor friend Basile shut up in that dreadful place. Give me leave, good gentlemen, to get speech with him, that I may comfort him, and I vow to say twenty aves in your behalf, and pray the saints to guard you whenever you are called upon to fight. Good gentlemen ! be kind to me, for I am sore grieved that my poor Basile has fallen into disgrace. Nay, I dare be sworn that neither you nor any man else could tell what his offence is. I’ll tell you. My sire loves Mademoiselle Adrienne de Bois, and Basile loves her too, and so my father has put him in here. That’s a mighty fine thing to be shut up in a dungeon for, eh ?’

The soldiers were highly amused, and grounding their calivers, laughed heartily. And one of them, named Martin, said :

‘Shoot me, but thou art a pretty boy, François, and distressful withal ; and by the fiend, I see no great reason why thou shouldst not be gratified, and have speech with the Jester, save this, that it is more than our lives are worth to

admit thee even an we had the power, but our captain keeps the key in his room.'

'Say not so, for the dear Christ's sake,' exclaimed François with a whimper. 'Now, I'll tell thee what I'll do, Martin. I will return when it is nine of the clock. It will be quite dark then, and there will be no danger. Canst thou not steal the keys when thou art off duty? Then thou and thy comrade could give me entrance to Basile, and that would enable thee to call this thine own.'

As he spoke he drew forth the little bag of money which Basile had given him some hours before for his own use. Martin's eyes glistened, and he pretended to snatch at the bag, but François drew his hand quickly away, and said:

'Promise me what I ask thee, and it shall be thine.'

Martin looked inquiringly at the other man, who nodded an assent, so Martin said:

'Good Master François, what dost thou value that money-bag at?'

'There is more in it than all thy year's pay for soldiering.'

'By Mars, but 'tis worth the gaining!' Martin answered. 'Now, we are relieved at six of the clock, and come on again at eight, an it be possible to obtain the keys they shall be got. Come thou here at nine of the clock, bring that bag with thee, and thou shalt see Basile, or may I never more sup Lammas ale.'

François hurried away, feeling that so far he had succeeded in his plan. A little later, in order to put Renaud off his guard, he took the precaution to visit him again, to tell him that Adrienne was suffering from an illness brought on by the excitement she had endured; but that he had fully persuaded her to consent to the marriage.

Quite deceived by the youth's plausibility, which was assumed as an imperative necessity, Renaud was unusually elated, and congratulated himself not only on his skill in plotting, but on his success in having got his enemy Basile in his power, and in having at last broken down all Adrienne's scruples.

It was about half-past eight when François stole cautiously from the palace, and, making his way through the grounds, reached the guard-house. The night was dark, fortunately. He found Martin at his post, for he would be on guard till midnight. As illustrating the spirit of intrigue and plotting

which was rampant amongst all classes of society at that period, Martin had procured through another soldier, by means of a small bribe, a flagon of a very strong drink, commonly used. It was a mixture of French eau-de-vie and a spirit that was distilled from vegetables. It was a powerful, fiery drink, and speedily intoxicated. With this stuff Martin had traded on the weakness of his comrade on duty with him, and who had a craving for spirits, until the unfortunate man had fallen down insensible, and Martin then dragged him to an obscure corner under a tree, there to sleep off his drunkenness.

'Where is thy comrade?' asked François, as he came up.

'Drunk,' was the curt answer.

'Hast thou succeeded in getting the keys?'

'Ay.'

'That is well,' answered François joyfully. 'And now listen. In a little while thou wilt have a visit from Bastian, the page. He is charged to secretly assassinate Basile, but Basile must be saved. Thou wilt now give me admittance, and lock the door again, but after Bastian has entered thou must contrive to keep the door unlocked. Dost understand?'

'Ay, good Master François; but what of Bastian?'

'Leave him to me, and trouble not thyself.'

'Thou must be cautious,' Martin remarked. 'Our captain goes the rounds every half-hour, and it were woe to all of us an he should discover our plot. Give me the money, and when thou art gone I follow, for to remain here would be to meet a dog's death at the end of a rope. In the meantime, as soon as thou hast entered I must take the keys back. By St. Christopher, but I am running a great risk!'

François handed the bag of coins to Martin, who secreted it in the breast of his jerkin. The door was then opened, and François found himself in the cell.

It was rather a large sort of room, with bare walls, a domed roof, and a stone floor. There was a common oak bench, a three-legged stool, and an old wooden bedstead furnished with a straw pallet. Basile was lying on the bed, but started up as the boy entered, and with joyful surprise clasped him in his arms.

François speedily related to the Jester that Bastian would be there anon, and what his object was in coming.

'I will secrete myself here,' François said, indicating a narrow space between the bed head and the wall. 'This stool

shall be my weapon. Take care that Bastian has his back to me.'

They continued to talk for some time and to arrange their plans, though they were both fully aware that they were far from being out of the wood yet, and any hitch in the plot might be fatal to them both.

Nearly an hour and a half passed, and they began to fear that Bastian was not coming. But at last a grating key in the lock warned them to be on their guard. In a few minutes the door opened, and Bastian entered.

Martin, the soldier, had succeeded in returning the keys to the hook in the guardroom where they were usually kept, so that they might be easily procurable when a disorderly soldier had to be thrust into the cell. Bastian had come to the captain with an order from Renaud for admission to Basile. The captain had sent one of his men with Bastian, and this man happened, as good fortune would have it, to be a great friend of Martin's, who engaged him in conversation and diverting his attention, drew the keys from the door, taking care to leave the door unlocked.

'Bastian is to have half an hour; didst thou not so state?' Martin remarked.

'Ay, camarade, that is the order.'

'Good; take thy keys, and come back then.'

The man went away, and Martin waited in anxiety for what was to follow. He had not to wait long. Basile placed a stool for Bastian, so that he sat with his back towards the recess, where François was concealed. Bastian's plan was to engage the Jester in conversation, and watching his opportunity, slay him. But in this case the fowler himself was snared. François with a quick, agile movement felled Bastian to the ground by a tremendous blow from the stool, where he lay stunned. Then Basile and the boy hurried out, and found Martin on the alert. Listening for a moment to assure themselves that the coast was clear, the three men hurried by a tortuous pathway through the shrubbery, until they reached a large tree that grew close to the wall. By climbing this tree they were enabled to gain the top of the wall, and so drop down on the other side. Each successfully accomplished the feat, and in a few minutes were making their way rapidly to Ye Lion, where they hoped to obtain horses to enable them to continue their flight to a place of safety.

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE REFUGEES.

AFTER a few days' stay in the gloomy, and yet picturesque, Castle of Dunbar, Queen Mary found herself at the head of a formidable army, which consisted for the most part of well armed and well drilled feudal retainers. She herself had not been idle, but had displayed the most restless energy, and a burning desire to be revenged on her enemies. Her craven husband was tortured with fears as to the consequences to himself for the murder of Rizzio, and in order to endeavour to restore himself to her Majesty's favour again, he meanly issued a declaration, which was publicly proclaimed in Edinburgh. Therein he basely contradicted the reports which had associated him with what he termed 'The late cruel murder committed in the presence of the Queen's Majesty, and treasonable detaining of her Majesty's most noble person in captivity.' And he further went on to declare on his honour, fidelity, and the word of a prince, 'that he never knew of any part of the said treasonable conspiracy whereof he was slanderously and falsely accused, nor never counselled, commanded, consented, assisted, nor approved the same.'

His cowardly disavowal of the part he had played in the conspiracy had the contrary effect to what he expected, and simply lowered him in his wife's opinion instead of restoring him to her favour; while his companions in guilt heard his lying declaration with stunned amazement. He himself had incited them to conspire for the defence of his honour, and the increase of his power; now his separation from them, and his betrayal of them to the Queen, filled them with loathing disgust, they execrated him, and being determined not to let him escape as though he was free from all blame, they communicated to her Majesty the two bonds he himself had signed, and in which it was arranged they were to confer on him the matrimonial crown, and to murder Rizzio.

These documents opened the Queen's eyes to the duplicity and hollowness of her husband; and withdrawing from him her confidence, she regarded him with feelings of unmitigated disgust; and she plainly gave him to understand that she

considered him an ungrateful husband, a perfidious conspirator, and a cowardly liar.

On a cold morning, as the white mists were swirling in from the sea, which was lashed into roaring fury by a strong gale, the Queen mustered her forces, nearly ten thousand strong, and with drums beating and banners flying, she set out once more for Edinburgh. She rode a magnificent white horse, whose only trapping was a scarlet cloth thrown over its back. Mary looked every inch a Queen, and beautiful to boot. Her face was flushed with excitement, and she was elated in an unusual degree at once more being in power. She rode at the head of her army, accompanied by a brilliant train of nobles, and so anxious was she to reach her capital again, that she frequently urged her horse into a gallop, and necessitated her friends going after her at full speed, and representing the danger she ran by separating herself from her guard.

The news of her approach at the head of such a formidable army caused intense excitement in Edinburgh, and a perfect panic amongst the conspirators, who waited for nothing, but mounting fleet horses, fled towards England for the safety of their lives.

Amongst the fugitives were Bomcester, his daughter Lilian, and his sister Julie. At first he had been disposed to remain and brave the Queen's wrath, for he had an extensive and valuable business; but it was represented to him that in the flush of victory, and wrathful with righteous anger, the Queen would show no leniency to anyone who had conspired against her, and least of all to him who had openly insulted her, and whose fanaticism had led him into the utterance of most violent and unjustifiable language.

He yielded to the solicitations of his friends, for a very little reflection showed him that he was too conspicuous and too powerful a figure to escape the Queen's notice, and that his life would of a certainty be forfeited. It was a great blow to him to have to make the sacrifices which flight compelled him to do; but there was no alternative, and so he set his servants to hastily pack up the most valuable of his goods, and engaging a number of hack-horses, he piled his things upon them, and turned his back upon the city.

To poor Lilian the blow was a heavy one, for the thought of leaving without seeing François almost crushed her, because, perchance, she would never see him again. She had to bear her

sorrow alone, for her father was too gloomy and too depressed to be approached, while Aunt Julie, still clasping her beloved Bible to her scraggy breast, turned the whites of her eyes upwards and moaned, refusing either to be comforted or to speak, save when now and again, by way of relieving her feelings, she turned her eyes down, and loaded her brother with reproaches, though why she did this was not very clear. No one knew, nor did she know herself. However, that was of no consequence. If she had not been able to abuse somebody she would probably have had apoplexy. No doubt her worthy brother thought of this and so tolerated her abuse, as he knew that, under the circumstances, he would have been put to tremendous inconvenience to bury her, unless he had dug a grave in a field or by the roadside. He, in fact, rode along in sullen silence, for the worldly sacrifices he had been compelled to make preyed upon his mind.

Lilian rode beside him, and it was with the greatest difficulty imaginable that she was enabled to keep the tears from gushing forth. In fact, as it was, her eyes were frequently dimmed, as she reviewed the past, in which she had known so little sunshine, and turned towards the future, which appeared no less dark—and darker still as the probability presented itself to her that never again would she behold François. Perhaps until this moment she had not known how intensely she loved him. Now she was strangely depressed, and felt as if nothing in the world could possibly interest her.

Thus the trio pursued their journey all day long in silence, their baggage animals following in a string. Bomcester was nervous and restless, and frequently glanced uneasily backward along the road, expecting to see armed men in pursuit. But he felt that it were better to be taken than abandon his property, and so he accommodated his pace to that of the hack-horses which carried the goods. During the day several other refugees from the city passed them on their way south, and they volunteered the information that the Queen was marching on Edinburgh at the head of an enormous army, and that large rewards were offered for the capture of any of the conspirators.

This latter was not pleasant news to the old fanatic, but, nevertheless, he resolutely declined to leave his property; for in spite of his fanaticism worldly wealth had a great charm for him.

Night was falling ar, tired and jaded, they reached a lonely hostel where they were enabled to obtain hospitality. Bomcester had all his goods taken into his sleeping-room, and piled in a heap in the centre of the floor, while he himself kept watch and ward over them, refusing to budge an inch. Not that there was much danger of thieves, for the hostel was lonely, and but few people were stopping in it. But still, the old man loved his wealth so intensely that even to imagine the possibility of losing so much as one ounce of it tortured him. When he had partaken of supper, which he ordered to be brought to his room, he fell to praying, calling on the Lord to protect him and his property, and to confound the Papist Queen Mary and all her followers.

Aunt Julie and Lilian supped together, but almost in silence, until they had finished, and then Aunt Julie drew a great sigh as she hugged her Bible, and exclaimed :

‘ Verily an affliction hath fallen upon us, and our enemies hath encompassed us round about ; but the Lord, whose name be praised, will deliver us out of their hands, and bring us into a land of peace and plenty. Hast supped well, child ?’ addressing Lilian.

‘ Exceedingly well, auntie.’

‘ We have been fed in the wilderness, and should give thanks,’ pursued the lugubrious Aunt Julie. ‘ By the rood, but I have a twinge of my rheumatiz ; and, as I am a poor sinner, it has struck me in my back. Lilian, child, thou shalt demand from mine host ten drops of his finest cognac. And see to it, that the water wherewith thou mixest my draught be boiling ; and Lilian—O Lord have pity on an old wench, but that was an awful twinge !—Lilian, thou mayst put twenty drops of fine cognac in the water. An mine host hath a luscious Spanish citron thou canst add a delicate slice. Thou wilt remember that when I had my rheumatiz at Candlemas the leech swore by the virtues of Spanish citron when its sharpness was blunted by fine cognac. And, child, see that mine host cutteth not the citron with a steel blade. Ugh ! these hostel-keepers be little better than barbarians. Stay, I think it were better that thou shouldst tell mine host to bring a flagon of fine cognac, and I will measure the drops myself, and look to it that he forgets not the sugar.’

Lilian tripped away to execute her commission, and dear Aunt Julie sighed again—a sort of raspy, weedy sigh, suggestive of

a wintry blast whistling through dead bulrushes ; and turning up her eyes again, she expressed a hope that the Lord would deliver her from her enemies.

In a few minutes Lilian returned with the information that the flagon of fine cognac would be forthcoming, but that mine host was full of sorrow at his powerlessness to produce the Spanish citron.

‘I dare be sworn, dear auntie,’ added Lilian, ‘that, an his looks belied him not, he hath never beheld a Spanish citron.’

‘Heaven forgive the poor barbarian!’ piously ejaculated Aunt Julie, as with her mittened and bony arms she more closely clasped her Bible. ‘Truly we are in the land of darkness and ignorance, an they knoweth not Spanish citron. It is a grievous deprivation to me, Lilian, not to have the citron in my mixture, but I accept with resignation the Lord’s will.’

In due time mine host appeared with a flagon of fine cognac and a steaming beaker of water, together with a bowl of sugar. And when Aunt Julie had descanted learnedly on the virtues of your Spanish citron, she dismissed him with an imperious wave of her withered hand, and then she proceeded to concoct her ‘rheumatiz mixture’ ; but whether it was that the dear old soul’s eyes were unusually dim, or her hand trembled by reason of her twinges, the ‘twenty drops’ of cognac were greatly exceeded, and a dose amounting to nearer two hundred was the result. But the potency of the draught did not seem to affect Aunt Julie very much, and as her twinges increased very considerably, she found it necessary to twice repeat her favourite remedy ; and then, noticing that her niece was dozing on the settle in the chimney-corner, she exclaimed huskily :

‘Child, thou shalt unloose my stomacher and take off my gown, and we will to bed ; and may the Lord protect us from Papists, robbers, cut-throats, and all such vermin.’

CHAPTER XXXVII.

AN ALARM AND A PLEASANT SURPRISE.

It was a sullen morning when the fanatical Bomcester, his sister, and daughter took their departure from the hostel, and

continued their southward journey. The morning was already well advanced; for much time had been consumed by Bomcester in counting all his things to see that nothing was missing, and in haggling with minc host about the reckoning.' He was as gloomy and as sullen as the morning, and he gave vent to his feelings in sighs and groans, intermingled with pious ejaculations and anathemas against the Papists, to whom he attributed all his misfortunes and trouble. Aunt Julie's 'twinges' had for the moment left her, but she deemed it prudent, good gentle creature, to fortify her system against any return of the 'rheumatiz' by a few drops of fine cognac. The beautiful Lilian looked jaded and even more depressed than on the previous day.

They were, in truth, a doleful party, though not without their comical aspect. The fanatic bestrode a horse much too small for him, so that his long legs nearly touched the ground, while Aunt Julie was seated on a great ambling beast whose colour was rusty gray, while his ribs were suggestive of hoops over which parchment had been stretched. Every now and then this fiery steed stopped to refresh himself by nibbling grass on the wayside. Then would Aunt Julie turn up the whites of her eyes in pious wrath, and she would drum with her heels on his ribs, but all to no purpose; he treated her with profound disdain. The consequence was she had to call upon one of the drivers of the hacks for assistance, and so by a forcible application of a stout hazel stick, the rusty gray animal was induced to move on a little further. This alternation between going and stopping took up a good deal of time, and sorely vexed the soul of poor Aunt Julie, who complained of twinges again, and expressed a very emphatic opinion that horses were like some men: they wanted a great deal of driving and hard thwacks before they would go the right way.

This drew the fanatic from his shell, and caused him to utter a remonstrance; and he said that he considered his sister was utterly wanting in that respect for the male sex which it was woman's bounden duty to have. "Whereupon Aunt Julie squeezed her eyes to try and get some tears from them; but failing in this, she turned to Lilian, and in very dolorous tones said:

'Thou wouldst do well, child, to note thy father's words. Thou wilt perceive, an thou be not a dullard, that a woman

has but a sorry time of it in this wicked world ; and when she becomes a man's wife she becomes his bond-slave. I praise the Lord that I have escaped the common lot. And, Lillian, see that thou dost not marry ; or an thou art bent upon marrying, marry a fool, so that thou mayest rule him.'

'Hold thy peace, woman !' roared her brother. 'Thou art an idle chatterer, with no more brains than Dame Fothergill's daughter, and as thou art aware, she is a born idiot.'

Aunt Julie uttered a shriek, and nearly fell from her rusty gray steed, and as she held one of her skinny hands aloft, she exclaimed :

'Oh, woe is me, that I should have lived to be called an idiot by my own flesh and blood ! Brother,' she added solemnly, 'thou wilt incur the wrath of the Lord, an thou art so disrespectful to thy poor weak sister, who is entitled to thy sympathy and not thy abuse.'

'Let not thy tongue wag so like a magpie, thou vinegar woman,' sneered her brother. 'I vow that thy senseless chattering doth distract me.'

He dug his knees into the ribs of his horse, in order to make it increase its speed, so that he might get beyond the range of his sister's voice.

Then Aunt Julie, stretching out her long, lean body, said scornfully to Lillian :

'Child, I have been called a vinegar woman. Oh, but it is monstrous that my mother's son should so insult me.'

'Agitate not thyself, dear aunt,' said Lillian soothingly. 'My poor father is sore distressed, and he sayeth things hastily. Be comforted, I pray thee, aunty.'

Aunty, however, refused to be comforted, and continued to pour out her vials of wrath on her brother's head until she had exhausted her vocabulary, and became silent, much to Lillian's relief.

Thus they rode along until about four o'clock in the afternoon, when a cry of alarm broke from one of the drivers of the hack-horses. He pointed back along the road they had traversed, and far away in the distance a great cloud of dust could be seen rising up, indicating the rapid approach of horsemen. Bomcester saw it and exclaimed :

'We are pursued. The enemy is upon us. May the Lord disperse and scatter our foes, even as chaff is scattered before the wind.'

The sudden fright caused Aunt Julie to go off into screaming hysterics, and, slipping from her horse, she fell on her knees in the dust, and began to pray in an excited voice. •

‘James,’ said Bomcester sternly, addressing one of his men, ‘carry that screeching female into the middle of yonder field, and there empty thy flagon of water over her head. Your cold water is a most excellent cure for light-headedness.’

At this order Aunt Julie sprang to her feet, and shaking her Bible at James, exclaimed :

‘Man, an thou hast regard for thy features, touch me not, for I will so mark thee that thou wilt think a forest cat hath had her way of thee.’

‘Truly she describes herself well,’ said Bomcester caustically. ‘Forest cats are dangerous cattle, therefore thou hadst best not meddle with her, James.’

This new indignity only served to incense Aunt Julie more, and there is no telling to what extent her injured feelings would have prompted her to go had not Bomcester thrust her on one side with an angry gesture, and said :

‘Thy name is Satan, get thee gone.’

This was too much for poor Aunt Julie, who fainted in earnest, so that James lifted her up and carried her to a clump of ferns at the base of some trees, where Liliah proceeded to loose her stomacher and to apply her scent satchel to her nose.

Bomcester stood in the centre of the road, looking the very personification of gloom and misanthropy. He strained his eyes in the direction of the advancing cloud of dust, and could plainly discern horsemen now, galloping at a furious pace.

‘An these be our enemies,’ he murmured, ‘we are lost. But we will defend ourselves, and pray the Lord to fight on our side. Hast got the pistols ready, James, and the caliver loaded ?’*

‘Ay, an it please you, master ; but an my old eyes deceive me not they be not soldiers that are coming.’

Bomcester drew a sigh of relief as he recognised this fact himself, and then suddenly he exclaimed :

‘They are refugees, like ourselves, fleeing from persecution, for, see, a woman rides with them.’

* A caliver was a kind of musket with a long barrel. It was generally loaded with a number of small bullets, and, for the period, was a formidable weapon, though it took some time to load.

In another few minutes the new-comers thundered up, their horses panting, and flecked with foam, they themselves covered with dust, and wearing anxious, jaded looks. And then there burst forth a cry of mutual surprise and recognition as they drew rein, for they were François, Adrienne de Bois, and Basile the Jester.

'The Lord preserve us,' exclaimed Bomcester, 'but this is a surprise! And where goest thou, Master François?'

'We journey to Berwick.'

'We also bend our steps in that direction. Thou art flying from the Queen's wrath?'

'Ay, we seek a place of safety for a time.'

'A murrain seize her,' cried Bomcester hotly.

'Hush!' said François quickly, 'thou must not speak like that of the Queen's Majesty. And thy daughter, goes she well?'

'She tends her aunt yonder, beneath those trees,' Bomcester answered sadly.

At that moment François caught sight of Lilian, and springing from his horse, he ran to greet her.

She beheld him with feelings of gratified amazement, for it seemed to be little short of a miracle that they should meet in such an unexpected manner, and when she had almost begun to mourn for him as one for ever lost. Forgetting Aunt Julie for the moment, the elated girl made a hurried move forward, as if to receive the embraces which he seemed ready to bestow. But a voice arrested her, and the voice was her father's.

'Thou art inclined to be too familiar with this lad,' he said.

'Father!' exclaimed Lilian indignantly, and blushing with shame and vexation.

'Surely, sir, you forget that at our last meeting you gave us permission to be alone,' put in François in surprise, and looking at the strange old man somewhat severely.

'Ay, that did I,' answered Bomcester. 'But now things are changed somewhat. Thou must renounce the Queen's Majesty and all her surroundings before thou wilt be privileged to claim my girl. But come, we will talk of that anon. Let us move onward lest we be overtaken by the ravening wolves who do the Queen's business. These are friends of thine, I trow?' Referring to Basile and Adrienne.

François kissed Lilian's hand, and whispered hastily: 'Be of good cheer, dear heart.' Then answering the fanatic's

question, he said: 'Even so, sir. The lady is my honoured foster-mother, who, on account of my unworthiness, has fallen under the Queen's displeasure.'

'Out upon the Queen for a jade,' cried Bomcester spitefully.

'Nay, sir, I do protest against this abuse of her Majesty,' François remarked, evidently to Bomcester's annoyance, though he said nothing. 'This gentleman,' François continued, 'is my excellent friend Basile, erstwhile Jester in her Majesty's Court.'

'I give thee greeting, sir, though thy trade is a sorry one,' growled Bomcester; 'thou wouldst do better to turn monk and save souls.' At this moment his attention was drawn to one of his pack-horses, which had become unruly, and flinging out its hind legs, tossed its burden of packages over its head, scattering lace, satins, ribbons, and fancy cloths about the road in a confused jumble.

Old Bomcester sprang from his nag with astonishing nimbleness, and raising both hands high above his head in an attitude of denunciation, he exclaimed: 'May the foul fiend torture thee and all thy stock, thou spittle of a venomous serpent! James! James!' he yelled, 'rescue those laces from the mire, for as I am an honest man I shall be ruined an they be soiled. And give me thy cudgel that in the Lord's name I may beat out the devil which has entered into this unruly beast.' Thereupon he proceeded to unmercifully flagellate the wretched animal, and when he had exhausted himself by the unusual exertion, he said pantingly: 'There is virtue in your oak cudgel and a stout arm. Thou art an enemy to peace of mind and pious thought,' he added, addressing the poor beast, which was trembling with fright. 'Thou art an offspring of Satan himself, but I thank the Lord that he has given me strength to subdue thee. Reload the beast, James, and see to it that my goods be not contaminated with the mire and dust.'

During this little scene François had helped Aunt Julie and Lilian to mount, and had ridden forward with the latter; Basile and Adrienne following side by side, while Aunt Julie brought up the rear. When the fanatic saw that the little party had left him behind he roared out:

'What ho, there! A plague upon you for scurvy tricksters. Have you so small regard for age and the dignity of the Lord's chosen servant that you dare to put this affront upon him?' He threw his long legs over his horse and urged it into a

gallop, and as he came abreast of François and Lilian he drew rein and exclaimed, as he struggled to regain his breath, 'Sirrah, an thou hast ever had good breeding thou must have left it behind in thy hurried flight; as for thee, daughter, thy shamelessness arouses my ire.'

'Nay, dear father——' she began.

'Peace!' he cried. Then turning to François, he said ironically: 'An thou art desirous of playing the gallant, bestow thy pleasantness upon my sister; she will appreciate thee. Nay, I verily believe she would welcome an ape an it wore a beard, and was dressed in a man's clothes.'

Aunt Julie's sallow visage lighted up with volcanic fires of wrath as she caught these words, and in a shrill tone she piped:

'Brother, I vow that thou art a pig, and thy language doth outrage to the innocence of my disposition.'

Bomcester laughed coarsely, if a contortion of his knotted face and the emission of a guttural sound from his cavernous mouth could be called a laugh.

Concealing the amusement he really felt, François placed himself beside the indignant Aunt Julie; and considering it a wise policy to propitiate her and win her regard, he began to talk soothingly and admiringly to her, until the dear creature broke out into a benign smile, and murmured with a long-drawn sigh:

'Thou art truly a handsome youth, and of exceeding great courtesy; one could almost love thee an thou wert not a Papist.'

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE RIFT IN THE LUTE.

In due time the incongruous cavalcade reached Berwick without further adventure, where the refugees were safe for the time being from Queen Mary's anger. On her return to her capital her Majesty lost no time in drawing up a list of those whom she intended to punish, should they return into her kingdom. Amongst the names figured those of François and Bomcester: the latter was described as an arch traitor and a dangerous fanatic, in whose house the plot for the murder of Rizzio was concocted; while François was accused of treachery, but was

offered a pardon on condition of his returning and giving details of the plot and a complete list of all those who had directly or indirectly been concerned in the conspiracy. Failing that he was not to come into the kingdom of Scotland again on pain of certain death.

When François heard this, as he speedily did, for news soon travelled down to Berwick, he was plunged into profound grief. Even if he had been in possession of the information desired, and for which a pardon was offered, it is doubtful if he would have given it. But he had no such knowledge, and so under any circumstances it seemed that he was for ever banished from the Queen's regard.

Old Bomcester was not at all affected by the indictment against him, but on every conceivable occasion he spoke of the Queen in terms of the vilest abuse; and his intense hatred of her made it evident that while he lived he would be a standing menace to her peace and safety. Notwithstanding that he had lamented deeply about the heavy losses he vowed he had suffered through his hurried flight from Edinburgh, he had not left much of his wealth behind him, and his natural aptitude for making money was soon turned to account in Berwick, where he commenced his business in an old house that stood on the banks of the Tweed.

Between him and François differences speedily arose, though it is almost needless to say that they were caused entirely by Bomcester. He charged the youth with being a secret partisan of the Queen of Scotland, whom he denounced as an immoral and profligate woman. He called upon François to join in these denunciations, and to renounce Catholicism, as the only means whereby he might hope to gain Lilian for his wife.

Both these courses François resolutely refused, though it is possible that he would have embraced the new faith had it not been for the influence of Adrienne de Bois and Basile, both of whom, being staunch Catholics, reviled the followers of the new doctrines in the bitterest terms, and pointed out to François that if he became a renegade his life would henceforth be cursed. The difficulties that thus beset him made him feel very unhappy. He was at present a dependant upon Adrienne, and he saw no prospect of securing Lilian for his wife unless he entirely fell in with her father's views. Although Bomcester did not entirely deny him the privilege and pleasure of seeing Lilian, he never allowed him to be with

her unless he himself were present at the time. But the fact is, the old man still looked on François as a pliable tool, and was hopeful that he might yet gain him over.

Thus matters lasted for some time, until François felt his existence to be intolerable. He saw quite clearly that he must decide between love and loyalty, and the consequence was he was constantly struggling with his feeling, and suffering keen mental distress.

One day his foster-mother informed him that she had decided to yield to the importunities of Basile and become his wife.

François heard this decision without any surprise, for he had all along seen that sooner or later it must come to that. But it caused him some secret trouble nevertheless, for, rightly or wrongly, he thought that he had no right to hope, and certainly could not expect, that his foster-mother would take the same interest in him after her marriage, and that, as a matter of fact, he would be more lonely than ever.

This feeling begot a strange unrest within him, and, driven almost to desperation, he sought an interview with Bomcester, during which he reminded him that he was not true to his word, for that he had absolutely promised him that he should marry Lilian. But that now that he had joined in a conspiracy, and was a fugitive from the Queen's wrath, the promise was as far off as ever from being fulfilled. Bomcester's answer was blunt and to the point so far as he was concerned.

'Forswear the Queen, change thy faith, and Lilian, with an ample fortune, is thine.'

It was a terrible temptation—a temptation that not many young men, as poor and friendless as François, would have resisted. Even he wavered a little, though for that he was to be pardoned, but he felt that though he loved Lilian intensely, the outrage he was asked to do to his feelings was too great a sacrifice.

Ever since the day when he had taken her part as against her brother, Aunt Julie and François had been excellent friends. And as if to avenge herself against her brother, she encouraged François to persist in his wooing of Lilian, and if he found that he could not in the end obtain the old fanatic's consent, she advised him to carry her off. This latter course, however, was not an easy one, seeing that he was poor, and had not even the means to pay for such assistance as would

have been necessary, while his poverty would have prevented him from providing her with a home. But, nevertheless, he thought that if he could get her to consent to elope with him, he would run the risk, and would apply to his foster-mother for a loan of money. Filled with this idea, he enlisted the sympathies of Aunt Julie, and prevailed on her to walk with her charge one evening on the banks of the Tweed, so that he could talk to Lilian out of her father's hearing.

She, poor girl, was no less troubled than he was. Her father's tyrannical rule pressed heavily upon her, and she longed for freedom from it, but she listened to François's proposal to elope with shuddering dread. Her sense of duty to her father was even stronger than her love for François, and she told him that she could not, dare not, leave him clandestinely, for he would curse her.

'Then the time has come, Lilian, when you and I must part,' said François sorrowfully.

'Alas! say not so,' she exclaimed in piteous accents. 'An thou goest, then indeed the light will go from my life.'

'But it is impossible for me to remain here any longer in this uncertainty,' he answered.

'But my father may relent,' she urged.

'I fear not,' François answered, 'unless I fulfil the conditions he has laid down, and which to me are absolutely impossible.'

The beautiful girl was overwhelmed with grief, and wept bitterly; but as she showed an unalterable determination not to go away without her father's consent, François, on his part, was equally determined. 'Then our roads diverge,' she said in a voice broken with sobs. 'Mine will be gloomy and pleasureless, as it has ever been; but thine will take thee into the wide world. Soon thou wilt forget me, and give thy heart to another.'

'No, as I hope for Heaven, no!' he cried passionately.

'Hush,' she said, 'make no rash vows. Thou mayest feel sure now, but when thou art away and the days go by, some fair face will soon attract thee.'

'May God forget me an I allow it to do so!' he said with great earnestness. 'Thy name is writ here on my heart, and no living woman shall ever erase it. Thy father has deceived me,' he added with bitterness, 'but my love for thee has not abated one jot, and never will.'

Lilian was terribly distressed, but since he persisted in going away, she felt she must resign herself to her fate. She allowed François to embrace her warmly, and she embraced him in return; and then when the deepening gloaming warned her and Aunt Julie that it was time to return, she and her lover parted with tears and sighs. He tore himself away broken-hearted, and some hours later, after having written letters to Adrienne and Basile to tell them that he was going off to seek his fortune, he stealthily left the town.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

A MYSTERIOUS WARNING.

By energy and determination Mary Queen of Scots had once more restored herself to power in her own kingdom, and had brought forth into the world a prince, who was destined, unwittingly, to push his royal mother from the throne, and, after a reign of thirty-five years in Scotland, to ascend the throne of England as James I.

The turbulent spirits, however, who kept the kingdom in a state of unrest, were still intriguing, and faction strove against faction, and party against party. Amongst the Queen's personal household, none seemed more devoted to her or more faithful than Philippe Renaud, now one of her chief physicians. She believed him to be a man in whom she could repose the most perfect confidence, for had he not even denounced his own son, when that son had conspired against her? This trust and confidence only served to make Renaud more unscrupulous, more ambitious, more designing. Basile's escape had annoyed him immensely, for he would have much preferred to have heard that he was dead; but he had represented Basile in such black colours to the Queen, that he did not deem it possible even that she would ever restore him to her favour. But though the Queen did not so express herself, she was truly sorry that Basile and Adrienne had gone; for she had known them both from her childhood, and Adrienne had been her girlish companion. Her Majesty therefore secretly resolved to recall her when an opportunity should occur.

Renaud, believing that he had nothing more to fear now that Basile, his enemy, had fled, began to weave plans for his

own aggrandizement. To gain more power, and acquire great wealth, was the dream of his life ; and thinking that he could best realize this by an apparent slavish serving of her Majesty, he took extraordinary means to impress her with his devotion, and one of these means was that of basely acting the spy on her unfortunate husband.

The Queen had come to look upon her husband with positive abhorrence, and one day, when Renaud had carried to her some piece of information against Lord Darnley, she sighed deeply, and said :

‘ Alas ! alas ! in what way have I so offended heaven that I should be tortured by such a man ? An he had been so grand a man as the noble Earl of Bothwell, then indeed would I have been his slave ; but my Lord of Darnley is a poor weak coward, whose very presence makes me shudder.’

These significant words were not lost upon Renaud, and he treasured them up for future use. The indiscretion of the Queen in uttering them was in keeping with her general conduct, for though brave, and even heroic, she was sadly wanting in that diplomatic caution which should be one of the strongest features in the character of a royal personage.

It was unfortunately an open secret that her Majesty had displayed a marked partiality for the Earl of Bothwell ; and those who loved her best did not hesitate to speak of it as ‘ a fatal passion.’ James Hepburn, the fourth Earl of Bothwell, was at this time about thirty years of age. He was not only rich, but held important offices in the kingdom, and was the husband of Lady Jane Gordon, who was the daughter of the Earl of Huntley.

Bothwell had nothing to recommend him in his looks, but he had a martial bearing, was fond of pleasure, possessed dauntless courage, an air of chivalrous devotion, and displayed the easy, elegant manner peculiar to France, where he had spent part of his life. The Queen was charmed with him. Her romantic and susceptible nature became a prey to his seductive blandishments, and her idea was to render him a faithful and useful servant. He on his part was a daring, ambitious man, and aspired to become her lover and her master ; but Lord Darnley, the husband, was a barrier that would first of all have to be removed.

At this time a border-war was raging in the south-east corner of the kingdom between three powerful families of

Liddesdale ; and in order to repress this war and restore tranquillity, her Majesty despatched Bothwell thither with the title of Lord-Lieutenant, and two days later she set out for Jedburgh, there to hold her assizes, and to endeavour by her personal influence to repress the sanguinary conflict then going on.

It chanced that on the very day that her Majesty was travelling to Jedburgh her favourite Bothwell had been sorely wounded in a personal fight with a notorious robber named John Elliot, and it had been found necessary to convey the wounded Earl to the Castle of Hermitage, of which he was then the owner. It was a powerful border fastness, rugged and stern amidst its wild surroundings.

The Queen heard with pain and alarm of the illness of Bothwell, and when she had discharged her imperative judicial functions at Jedburgh, she took horse and hastened to the Castle, accompanied by Renaud and some of her nobles. It was a long and harassing ride, and the Queen's anxiety to reach her destination was so great that she took no refreshment, and allowed herself no rest. On arrival, she stayed an hour with the wounded Earl, and then rode back again. She occupied lodgings in an old house in the town of Jedburgh, and that night she spent several hours in writing to Bothwell, notwithstanding that she had only just left him. Her room was a low-pitched wainscoted chamber, narrow and long, and communicated at each end with other rooms, which in their turn communicated with a corridor that was connected by a flight of stairs with the courtyard. The Queen had expressed a desire to be left alone for some time, and had given orders that she was not to be disturbed. This order led to some laxity on the part of her attendants, who made it an opportunity to enjoy themselves, while—the night being stormy and bitterly cold, for October was well advanced—the guard on duty in the courtyard had stolen into the great kitchen, to flirt with the serving wenches, and drink hot ale before the blazing wood fire on the cavernous hearthstone.

It thus came about that a man, watching his opportunity, was enabled to slip through the guard and gain the stairway without being observed. He was entirely enveloped in a long brown cloak and cowl, such as was worn by mendicant friars ; and in order to more effectually screen his face he wore over it a piece of black muslin, which rendered recog-

nition impossible. With stealthy steps he passed into the Queen's apartments and gained the doorway of the one where she was busily writing. For a moment he stood regarding her. Then he made a noise with his foot to attract her attention.

She looked up, and her face, already pale, became paler still as a shock of fright almost paralyzed her heart.

'Madame, have no fear,' said the man. 'I am here not to injure, but to warn you.'

'Who art thou?' she gasped in choking accents, and feeling as if she were suffocating, and that all the strength was going from her limbs.

'A friend,' was the answer that came from the mysterious figure.

'And thy business?' she faintly murmured.

'To warn and caution your Grace.'

'Against whom, and what?' she gasped in a voice that was almost inaudible. But the man heard it, and without advancing an inch, he answered in solemn and measured accents:

'Beware of Philippe Renaud. He is an impostor and a treacherous servant of your Majesty. He aims only at gaining power. Beware also of the Earl of Bothwell, or he will bring your Majesty to shame and sorrow.'

The Queen by this time had almost fainted, and the room seemed to be swimming round her. Then the mysterious stranger disappeared as silently and stealthily as he had come, and passing down the stairs and through the courtyard, gained the street without being discovered.

For some little time her Majesty remained in a dazed and half-stupefied state, until by a desperate effort of her wonderful energy, she roused herself up, and sounded her bell, which brought her chief female attendant.

'Your Majesty is ill?' cried the woman in grave alarm.

'No, no,' murmured the Queen; 'but tell me hast thou seen anyone pass to my chamber or from it?'

'No, your Majesty, as I hope for mercy,' the woman answered, turning deadly pale with superstitious fear.

'It is strange—very strange,' mused the Queen. 'I could have sworn that a cloaked figure entered my room and addressed some words to me.'

'Your Majesty is faint and weary. An it please you, I will

summon your Majesty's maids to put you to bed.' The Queen made a sign as if she objected to this, but the woman pleaded :

'An it please your Majesty, I crave you retire, for your Majesty looks so ill and weary.'

The Queen could no longer disguise from herself that she was ill. The extraordinary exertions she had gone through, her great mental distress at Bothwell's illness, and now the fright she had received by the strange appearance of the cloaked figure, had told upon her, and she felt that her strength had left her, and as if she were dying. So obvious was this illness that the woman took upon herself to summon the attendants. No sooner was this done than her Majesty fell into a deep swoon, and remained unconscious for some hours, and apparently at the point of death. She rallied, however, but was seized with a violent fever, and relapsed into insensibility, which lasted for several days.

CHAPTER XL.

THE LEECH AND THE EARL.

THE Queen lay in an extremely dangerous condition for many days, and it seemed as if her end had really come. The Earl of Bothwell, being convalescent from his wound, hastened to her, and his presence seemed to have a good effect. She recovered but slowly, however, and it was not until well on in November that she was able to leave Jedburgh.

It was stormy, wintry weather, and the hurtling blasts of icy wind drove down blinding snow wreaths until the whole expanse of country was pallid and silent, as if touched with the chill of death. The Queen, who still suffered extremely, appeared careworn and melancholy. She reposed on silken cushions in a litter that was borne by relays of men. But progress was slow and difficult, for the paths—roads being unknown—were obliterated in many parts with snow, and in places were worn into deep ruts and holes by the autumn rains.

A large retinue accompanied the Queen; it included, besides an armed force, the Earl of Bothwell and his own personal followers, and a number of other noblemen. Renaud was

still in attendance on her Majesty, notwithstanding the warnings she had twice received, first from her favourite Adrienne, and then from the mysterious stranger who had audaciously penetrated to her private chamber at Jedburgh. But though her manner had in no way altered to him, her faith had been somewhat shaken; before she had been three days on the road, however, that faith was made whole again by reason of his devotion and attention.

The journey was performed by short stages along the coast. The sea was wrathful, being lashed into fury by the fierce winter gales; and the thunderous surf as it beat upon the rocky shore filled the air with flying spume and deafening roar. The sullen, ashen, and boisterous weather seemed to depress the royal invalid until she was overwhelmed with grief and sorrow, and several times she exclaimed:

‘I could wish to be dead. I could wish to be dead.’

On one of these occasions Renaud, who was beside her litter, ventured to say:

‘Wherefore, madam, are you so unhappy?’

She turned her white face towards him, and fixing her languid, mournful-looking eyes on his, she answered in tones that scarcely rose above a whisper:

‘Alas, good Renaud, an thou knew how heavy is my heart, thou wouldst not wonder at my sighs and groans.’

‘Your Grace’s heart should be light,’ he said insinuatingly.

‘Should be!’ she echoed. ‘Ay, *should be*, an it were not chained to one who values it not, and who has tried so hard to break it.’

Renaud glanced about him to make sure that no ear was sufficiently near to catch his words, and then he remarked cautiously:

‘An I read your Majesty’s words aright, it is my Lord of Darnley who has so treated your Grace.’

The Queen made no answer. She only sighed and looked at him. But what other answer did he require? The King’s conduct had been such as to cause the Queen the most poignant grief, and if she hated him he had brought it upon himself.

After a journey of twelve days the royal traveller reached her favourite residence, Craigmillar Castle, within a league of her capital. She was still very ill, and being much in need of rest, she decided to sojourn a fortnight at Craigmillar. The

Earl of Bothwell remained in close attendance on her, and she seemed to derive great pleasure and comfort from his presence.

One afternoon, when the short winter day was darkening to its close, the Earl was passing to his quarters, having been paying a visit to the Queen, when a man suddenly confronted him as he turned an angle in the passage.

'Most noble Earl, I would humbly crave private speech with you,' said the man.

'What art thou?' exclaimed the Earl, half drawing his sword, suspecting treachery; for in the gloom he could not distinguish the speaker.

'I am Philippe Renaud, the Queen's physician,' came the answer.

'Ah, by my faith, I knew thee not, good Renaud,' said the Earl, returning his sword to its scabbard. 'Come thou to my chamber, and we will speak together.'

Bothwell led the way to his sumptuously-furnished room, where, throwing himself on to a cushioned seat, he motioned Renaud to be seated also, and then he said:

'We are free to speak without fear of interruption. What is thy pleasure, Master Renaud?'

'I would speak of her Majesty, as it so please you,' answered Renaud, fixing his eyes upon the Earl.

'Of her Majesty! And what of her? Speak freely, for I am interested in all that concerns the Queen's person.'

'You know, my lord, that her grace has a heavy sorrow at her heart, and I much fear it retardeth her recovery.'

'Thou art her leech, and shouldst know,' returned Bothwell artfully, and watching his companion's face out of the corners of his eyes. 'But an thou art skilled in thy trade, thou shouldst discover the sorrow and endeavour to remove it. To know the cause of a disease is to be able to suggest a remedy.'

'Right well do I know the cause of the disease, my lord; but the remedy lies in your lordship's hands.'

'How say you so?' exclaimed the Earl, affecting to be indignant, and turning a little pale.

'Nay, as it please you, my lord, reserve your anger,' Renaud said imperturbably. 'The disease is her Grace's husband; and though I be a leech I know no remedy for *that* complaint.'

Bothwell started, and seemed uneasy. Then sitting upright, he made answer, while an expression pregnant with a deep meaning came into his dark face:

‘Good Renaud, have a care of thy tongue, lest it cut off thine own head. We live in dangerous times, and we must be cautious for fear the very spirits of the air spread our secrets abroad.’

‘You said but now, my lord, that we were free to speak without fear of interruption,’ Renaud remarked pointedly.

‘Ay, ay—true,’ answered Bothwell, a little disconcerted. ‘But come, now, thou hast referred to her Majesty’s disease; art thou *quite sure* thou knowest not a remedy?’

‘I have heard it said, my lord, that for such diseases *divorce* is good,’ said Renaud slowly.

The Earl turned his face away as if to hide what was passing in his mind, and it was only after a considerable pause that he replied very pointedly by asking a question:

‘Dost thou mean a legal divorce, Renaud?’

Renaud, not to be outdone in astuteness, answered almost sharply:

‘Verily so, my lord, since I know ‘not other means of obtaining a divorce.’

The Earl shrugged his shoulders, and replied:

‘Nor I. But hast thou reflected, Renaud, how many difficulties lie in the way? The Queen’s Majesty is cousin to the King, her husband; and, in order to remove that disability to their marriage, the Pope granted a dispensation, and how could he be asked to remove that? An thou knowest aught that would sustain a charge of adultery against the King, or could we prosecute him for treason, then might there be hope for the Queen’s disease. But failing that, alas! I see nothing but shadows for her poor Majesty as long as she may live.’

‘Nor I,’ returned Renaud, ‘save——’

‘Save what?’ cried the Earl eagerly, as the other paused on the word and showed no intention of proceeding.

‘Save the King should be called away,’ Renaud added slowly.

‘Now art thou tedious,’ exclaimed Bothwell. ‘What meanest thou by *called away*?’

‘I mean that there is no way *save* it should please Heaven to remove him to a better world.’

‘And thou wouldst suggest that his removal be hastened,’ Bothwell remarked quickly and bluntly.

‘I said not so.’

‘No; but that is thy thought. Give thy thoughts vent, man. I am thy friend, and not thy enemy. Therefore speak

freely. And mark me, Renaud,' he added with great significance, 'the Earl of Bothwell *never betrays and never forgets his friends.*'

Renaud bent one knee before the Earl and said, with well simulated humility:

'I claim the high honour of being your friend, my lord, if to be staunch and true and faithful implies friendship.'

'By the Mass, they do!' cried the Earl.

'Then wishing only to serve you well,' Renaud went on, 'I would say that my Lord of Darnley should die.'

'How?' cried Bothwell.

Renaud rose, and bowing, said:

'My lord, I have suggested a remedy for the Queen's most desperate malady; but, an you will give me leave to say it, it is for you, my lord, to find a means for the administration of the remedy.'

Bothwell became very thoughtful and frowned gloomily. He paced up and down for a little while as though quite oblivious of Renaud's presence. But suddenly he stopped, and laying one hand on Renaud's shoulder, and with the other taking Renaud's hand, he said, as he peered into his eyes:

'Thou art in very truth a friend; but be cautious. We will talk anon of this matter. In the meantime observe, but speak not; and let this be a pledge of secrecy between thee and me.'

He took from his neck a gold chain of fine workmanship, to which was suspended a diamond cross; he placed it round the neck of Renaud, then dismissed him. And when Renaud got into the corridor he clutched the diamond cross in his hand and thought to himself:

'The riches are coming at last. All that I have hoped for, all that I have craved, all that I have dreamed of will be mine. Riches, and high estate, and power—ay, *power*, that is worth all the others.' He smiled sardonically at his own thoughts; then suddenly the smile passed, giving place to a deep anger frown, and he muttered audibly: 'I *must* win! Let those who would thwart me beware!'

CHAPTER XLI.

THE QUEEN AND THE CLOWN.

THE Earl of Bothwell sat in thoughtful silence for a long time. Shadows were around him, but he saw them not. Had he done so he might have been startled, bold as he was; for he would have seen the terrible fate that awaited him and the hapless Queen. But he looked no further into the future than so far as it concerned his own immediate advancement. He was daring and pitiless, and aimed at eagle flight. To grovel in the dust, as some men were content to do, would not suit him. He would soar up towards the sun and bask in its dazzling brightness. And to one youthful as he was, daring as he was, unscrupulous as he was, and powerful as he was, what could be impossible?

He rose from his reverie with stern resolution, and a determination to lift himself up and up, even to the throne.

‘Her Majesty suffers grievously,’ he murmured, ‘and it were unkind not to give her ease. The remedy for her Majesty’s sickness lieth in my hands, so said the villain, Renaud. We will see an it be so.’

Bothwell lost no time in gathering around him powerful as well as daring spirits, who were ready to do his bidding and carry out his suggestions slavishly. Amongst them were Lord Tethington, Sir James Balfour, the Earl of Huntly and Argyle. They formed themselves into a homicidal league, and they bound themselves by oath and a signed bond to ‘cut off the King as a young fool and tyrant who was an enemy to the nobility, and had conducted himself in an intolerable manner to the Queen’s Majesty.’ They further pledged themselves to stand true to each other and defend their desperate deed as a necessary measure of state.

A month later the Queen had almost recovered her usual health, and her infant son was baptized with great magnificence in Stirling Castle. The event was celebrated with great rejoicing; and though it was wintry weather, and bitterly cold, festivities on a stupendous scale were prepared. The old castle was ablaze with banners, and from the ancient ramparts cannon thundered the whole day long. A brilliant assembly of nobles

had gathered together, and an ambassador with a large retinue had arrived from England, bearing a solid gold font as a present from Queen Elizabeth. In the town a fair was held, and the country people flocked in from the country for many miles around. Whole sheep and oxen were roasted at huge bonfires, and cakes and ale were distributed by tons gratuitously.

Lord Darnley, though resident in Stirling Castle at this time, was not present at the imposing ceremony of the baptizing of his own son. He seemed to have sunk into gloomy apathy, he shut himself up in his own apartments and held aloof from the festivities, although requested to show himself to the people. The Queen was much irritated and annoyed by his conduct, but she managed, for the time being, to throw aside her sadness, while her natural amiability and grace asserted themselves ; and when the night had come she gave her consent to a masque being performed by some mummers.

This masque was enacted in the grand reception-room of the castle. It was a tragic story, but the gloom was relieved by the antics of a merry-andrew who, grotesque and ridiculous in paint and feathers, cut such capers, and was so full of jokes, that he kept the royal audience convulsed with laughter. This merry-andrew was evidently a young man, but his features were so disguised with paint that it was difficult to tell what he was like.

The Queen, with Bothwell on her right, sat close to the little stage, and behind her were her nobles and members of her household, Renaud being conspicuous as sitting close to the royal chair.

During the progress of the masque the merry-andrew pretended to be a fortune-teller, and, approaching the Queen, dropped on one knee before her, and begged her to show him her royal hand. Much amused by his audacity and buffoonery, she complied with his request, and he, affecting to read the lines in her palm, said :

‘Your Majesty hath a son.’

‘Go to, thou foolish loon,’ replied the Queen good-humouredly, ‘an thou canst tell us nothing newer than that we’ll dub thee knave, and have thee trounced.’

‘Nay, your Majesty, an it please you, your Majesty, I am but a poor clown, and know not knavery,’ the man answered

with abject meekness, and bowing his head. 'But your Majesty's son shall become a king,' he continued, as he pretended once more to read the lines in the Queen's hand.

'Ah, now dost thou speak well,' the Queen murmured; 'and yet thy prophecy hath not much wit about it.'

'Your Majesty will have long life,' the man went on. 'Your Majesty has good friends, but, alas! enemies also. See to them, your Majesty, for they are dangerous villains. There is one who hath no blue blood in his veins. He is a plebeian; watch him well, your Majesty, for he is, in truth, a very cunning knave.'

'Go to, and resume thy place,' answered the Queen peremptorily, with some display of anger at the man's boldness, and by no means feeling comfortable, for his words suggested Renaud to her thoughts at once.

The fellow rose from his knees, when suddenly his painted face became contorted with horror, as it seemed, and he appeared to be trembling in all his limbs.

'Art thou ill?' her Majesty demanded in alarm as she half started from her seat.

'No, an it please your Grace,' said the man with quivering voice; 'but that worthy gentleman hath looked at me, and he hath an evil eye.'

The 'worthy gentleman' alluded to by the merry-andrew was none other than Renaud, who turned deadly pale, and rising, seemed as if he were going to strike the clown. But the Queen, who was very angry now at this untoward incident, said commandingly:

'Monsieur Renaud, resume your seat. The silly loon hath no manners, but he is privileged at this time to say foolish things.' Then, turning to the clown, she said sharply: 'Get thee gone, sirrah; thou hast abused the liberty we have accorded thee, and we are disposed to have thee cudgelled, that in future thou mayest learn better manners.'

The man, whose greasy painted face still depicted fear, bowed very low, and then, as he was raising his head again, he muttered, but distinctly enough for her Majesty to hear his words, though Renaud could not hear:

'He hath an evil eye, your Majesty, he hath an evil eye. Beware of him, lest he doeth a grievous wrong to your Grace.'

Having thus delivered himself, the clown leapt on to the little stage and disappeared behind a curtain.

The Queen was greatly agitated, and her first impulse was to have the fellow arrested; but she saw at once that this would be giving importance to a ridiculous though unpleasant incident, so she decided to take no further notice of it.

Although she was pleased to think the incident ridiculous, it affected her more deeply than she cared to confess, for, coupled with the mysterious warning she had received at Jedburgh, it seemed to have some significance. At a later period of the evening, when she was alone with Bothwell, she asked, in an assumed tone of careless indifference :

‘My Lord Bothwell, what opinion do you hold with reference to my physician Renaud?’

The Earl was a little taken off his guard by the question, but suddenly it flashed upon his mind that it might be to his own interests now to get rid of Renaud once and for all. He did not see how he could use him further, and owing to what had passed between them the Earl knew that to some extent he was in Renaud’s power. So, laughingly, he made answer to the Queen thus :

‘An it so please your Grace, the matter hath concerned me not hitherto, since I have deemed Monsieur Renaud a somewhat insignificant personage. But since your Majesty demands to know my humble opinion, I should be lacking in honesty an I failed to say plainly that I like him not.’

‘And wherefore so?’ exclaimed her Majesty, with suddenness and alarm.

‘Nay, your Grace, be not alarmed,’ Bothwell returned, wishing to reassure her; ‘as I am an honest gentleman, I believe Monsieur Renaud to be a knave; but he is powerless, and a wave of your own sweet hand would sweep him away.’

The Queen looked at Bothwell for some moments. Then she turned from him without further remark. His words, taken in connection with the warning at Jedburgh, and the clown’s remark that night about the evil eye, however, made a great impression upon her, and for the first time she began to suspect Renaud of treachery. Hitherto she had had great faith in him. Now that faith was once more shaken, and she resolved that in future she would trust him less and watch him more.

CHAPTER XLII.

INTO THE SHADOW OF DOOM.

RENAUD, after that incident at the masque, became conscious that the Queen's manner had somewhat changed towards him, and he had grounds for thinking that he was falling into her disfavour, if he had not already done so. This, however, only encouraged him to intrigue the more, believing that he would have a greater hold over her Majesty if the plot to murder Darnley was successfully carried out. He therefore connived with the conspirators, and in particular he sought to cement the bond between himself and Bothwell. The Earl, on his part, would have liked to have shaken him off, but herein he showed himself to be a less clever man than Renaud, who was now a perfect master in the art of deception and intrigue. The Earl was compelled to recognise that in Renaud he had no ordinary person to deal with, for the Frenchman was daringly ambitious, far-seeing, and capable by force of character of drawing men to him, and as a matter of fact he was the recognised head of a secret and powerful faction, ready at any moment to do his bidding.

Under these circumstances feelings of prudence and caution induced Bothwell to make a show of friendship, although at heart he hated Renaud. But he resolved, since it was now impossible to break away from him, to endeavour to place him very conspicuously in the conspiracy, so that should revelations be made afterwards, he would have no chance of escape. This design, however, was one in which two could take a hand, and Renaud had conceived a similar idea with reference to Bothwell, whom he distrusted, envied, and secretly feared. Thus these two bold and crafty villains tacitly agreed to hate each other, while outwardly they professed to be warmly attached.

In the meantime the diabolical plot for the assassination of the King developed, and the end was not far off. Darnley had been attacked with a grievous illness at Glasgow, and this illness subsequently proved to be small-pox. The Queen set out for Glasgow to see him; and when they met, much to his surprise, she lavished upon him marks of the strongest affection. Darnley was perfectly well aware that previous to

this she had reviled him, and therefore he was not without suspicion that the new turn in affairs meant mischief. He was melancholy and despondent, and he made known his apprehensions to his wife. The Queen twitted him with his fears, and accused him of being deficient in courage and resolution; and then, displaying unusual warmth towards him, her former influence was soon regained. Amongst the numerous attendants on the Queen, who had accompanied her from the capital, was a Frenchman named Nicholas Hubert, who was commonly known as 'Paris.' This man was a confidential servant in the service of the Earl of Bothwell. He was a dark-complexioned, well-made man, cunning and serpent-like as to his general appearance, and silent and mysterious as to his movements.

Two days after the Queen's arrival in Glasgow Paris secretly departed in the dead of night for Edinburgh, being the bearer of a private letter from her Majesty to Bothwell.

In a few days Paris returned and gave to the Queen the information that his master had prepared a house in Kirk-o'-Field for the reception of the King, since to take him to Holyrood, suffering as he was from infectious disease, might be to expose the baby prince to the danger of catching the complaint.

The Queen made known to her husband what had been done, and told him that when he was a little stronger she would accompany him back to the capital. Darnley heard of the plans with some misgiving. While on the one hand he yearned to be once more in the Queen's favour, and, as her husband, enjoy her confidence and trust, on the other hand he doubted and even feared her. Perhaps she divined something of this, for she increased her expressions of affection, and showed him even more attention. Deluded by these manifestations, his fears faded away, and his pale cadaverous face, which had so long been clouded with the deepest melancholy, assumed an expression of joyfulness and expectancy that caused him to look several years younger.

Having thus got over his fears, he began to lavish caresses and extravagant praise upon his wife, and he talked of the near time when once again in the brightness of her love he would be ever by her side, to protect her and guard her interests, and share with her the cares of State.

At last the day came for their departure, and the Queen

made arrangements for the journey to be performed by easy stages. Darnley was to be conveyed in a litter, while the Queen elected to travel on horseback.

When the hour arrived for his leaving Glasgow, where at least he enjoyed security, Darnley's old brooding fears came upon him again. Once more his faith in his wife was shaken, and he observed to an intimate friend as he was on the point of departure :

'I have fears enough, but may God judge between us. I have her promise only to trust to, but I have put myself in her hands, and I shall go with her though she should murder me.'

A few days later, on a sobbing morning at the end of January, Darnley and the Queen drew near the capital, and at a short distance from the gates the Earl of Bothwell came with a great retinue to meet them, and thence conducted them to the house in Kirk-o'-Field.

The building that had been chosen for the royal lodging was an ill-conditioned place, and quite unadapted for the purpose. It had formerly been the property of the prebendaries of the Kirk-o'-Field, and it was small, confined, badly ventilated, and badly furnished. It consisted of but two stories, one of which contained a cellar and another room. The other consisted of a gallery, which extended above the cellar, and a bedchamber which corresponded with the room beneath. In this bedroom a new bed had been placed, and it was hung with black figured velvet, which gave it a most funereal aspect, so that the young King, who was still an invalid, started and turned pale as he entered. And when his servant inquired what it was that affected him, he answered with a mournful smile :

'It seemeth to me as if that bed with its sable trappings was a funeral couch.'

Three servants of the King were installed in the gallery, while the underneath room was prepared for the Queen, and the cellar was for the nonce turned into a kitchen.

Here in this uncomfortable and barren place Mary Queen of Scots and her husband Darnley passed several days and nights. The house was isolated and lonely, though it stood near an old Dominican convent of Black Friars. Kirk-o'-Field itself was an extensive and open space, just outside of Edinburgh, and scattered about were several houses, nearly all of them being provided with gardens. One of these houses,

the best in the Field, was the town residence of the Duke of Chatelherault. To this residence Darnley's servants had originally gone, intending to prepare it for their master's reception ; but, by order of Bothwell, the other one was selected, owing, no doubt, to its isolated position, which offered better opportunities for successfully carrying out the nefarious plot. This house, moreover, was at the time the property of one Robert Balfour, who was a toady to, and a creature of Bothwell's, and a near relative of Sir James Balfour, who had drafted the bonds for the murder.

The fatigues of the journey told somewhat on Darnley, and he had a slight relapse of his illness ; but the Queen redoubled her attentions, and became more assiduous ; and she gave such manifold proofs of her affection that not only did he regain strength again, but the fears that had haunted him disappeared. He began once more to dream ambitious dreams, and to look forward to the day when he would be a king in something more than name.

CHAPTER XLIII.

THE PLOT THICKENS.

WHILE the Queen was thus deluding her husband by leading him to believe that she had once more restored him to a high place in her affections, the daring and unscrupulous Earl of Bothwell was elaborating and perfecting the plot which had for its object the destruction of Darnley. In addition to the many accomplices amongst the nobility whom he had secured, the Earl took into his confidence some of his servants as well as some men-at-arms who had fought with him in the Border wars, and whose courage and devotedness he had amply tested. And apart from these he manifested great affection for Renaud, and told him that his services were indispensable. This affection was, of course, a sham, for he detested Renaud. He saw that he was cute, cunning, unscrupulous, and ambitious, and that he was simply playing his own game. It was therefore Bothwell's aim to so implicate Renaud as to get him quite in his power, even if he could not succeed in destroying him also, which he hoped to do. This fear of Renaud arose because the Earl knew perfectly well that he was not to be trusted, but he had gone too far with him to throw him over

now, and so he loaded him with presents, and tried to make him believe that he truly liked him.

Renaud, however, was in every way a match for his noble-blooded, but treacherous, confederate. He read and probed the Earl better than the Earl read and probed him, and he knew perfectly well that the rich presents were simply so many sops, and the professions of friendship and affection simply false.

'I play to win,' Renaud often said to himself. 'The dear Earl of Bothwell believes that he has a mouse in me, but when the proper time comes he may discover that he has mistaken a wolf for a mouse, and that I can devour him.'

Bastian, the creature and page of Renaud, was also fully cognizant of the conspiracy, but he took no active part in it. His master, however, was careful that he should be a witness of the doings of the chief actor, and so Renaud constantly made notes of Bothwell's proceedings, and now and again he made Bastian attest these notes by appending his signature to them. Renaud's motive for this was to use them some day against the Earl, should the latter ever show any wish to cast him over.

Amongst Bothwell's other tools was the Frenchman Paris, whom he had placed in the Queen's service in order that he might exact from him more assistance. Paris, however, was kept in ignorance that the King was to be actually murdered until Bothwell was compelled to inform him, as he felt that his services were indispensable. The Earl had had false keys made, so that access might be gained to the house at any time, and he wished Paris to ascertain if these keys were a facsimile of those in use, and he also wished him to place a barrel of gunpowder in the room beneath the one that Darnley slept in.

Paris heard the revelation of the plot which his master was devising with abject terror, and falling on his knees before the Earl, exclaimed:

'Alas, my lord, I am your willing and devoted servant, but I am not fitted for such devil's work as this, and I pray you, therefore, release me from your service.'

'Tut, poor man,' answered Bothwell with forced humour, 'thou art chicken-hearted and white-livered. But surely thou art magnifying the deed. Nay, I vow by my faith the deed is a good one, seeing that it will rid her Majesty of a detestable

husband, and bring happiness to her. Dost thou not approve of the plan now ?

‘In truth, no, my lord.’

Bothwell’s face darkened, and he asked with impatience :

‘What is thy opinion of it ?’

‘Pardon me, sir, if I tell you my opinion according to my poor mind.’

‘Thou wouldst not dare to preach to me,’ growled the Earl, growing still more angry.

‘No, my lord, indeed not.’

‘Say on, then.’

‘Humbly would I remind you, my lord, with your gracious permission, how great is the danger you run, and how great is the wickedness of the deed you would do. You, my lord, have had trouble and misfortunes in your past life, but now you have attained to tranquillity and greatness. Imperil not those things.’

‘I would enjoy more tranquillity and greater greatness,’ cried the Earl irritably.

‘Alas, sir, murder bringeth not tranquillity,’ Paris answered, still trembling with fear, and being really desirous of dissuading his master if possible from running the terrible risks. ‘And believe me, sir, that if you undertake this thing it will prove the greatest trouble you have ever had, and above all the others you have ever endured. Men will cry out against you, and you will be destroyed.’

‘Well, hast thou done ?’ cried the Earl with suppressed passion.

‘You will, my lord, pardon me as one who is faithful and true to you, if I have spoken freely according to my poor mind.’

‘Thou art a fool !’ Bothwell exclaimed, stamping his foot violently. ‘Dost think I am going to do this deed all alone by myself ?’

‘I know not, sir, how you are going to do it,’ answered Paris meekly. ‘But this I know, it will be the greatest trouble you have ever known.’

‘Pooh, thou art affected with child’s fear,’ sneered the Earl. ‘Thou shouldst not wear a man’s garb, but put on petticoats, for I swear thou art but as a silly wench who feareth to enter a darkened chamber. Why, I have already with me Tethington, who is accounted a most prudent man. He it is who is the undertaker of all this. And then I have also Monsieur

Renaud, her Majesty's physician; the Earl of Argyle, my brother Huntly, Morton, Ruthven, and Lindsay. But go to; thou art a poor fool with a weak mind, unworthy to hear anything of consequence.'

'It may be as you say, my lord,' Paris returned; 'but I pray you release me from your service, for I fain would wash my hands of this dreadful business.'

The Earl felt uneasy, and glared ferociously at the kneeling man. Then suddenly he drew his dagger, and seizing Paris roughly by the arm, he brandished the weapon above his head.

'Dost take me for as big a fool as thou art thyself?' he cried fiercely. 'I have made thee so far a confidant that I would not let thee go now lest thou shouldst betray me. Thou shalt take a hand in this business, or thou shalt not leave this room alive.'

Paris had broken out into a cold perspiration, and his hair almost stood on end with deadly fear. He was a craven at heart and clung to life, and he knew perfectly well that the threat of his master was no idle one, but would of a surety be put into execution. So, looking up with piteous face and raising his clasped hands supplicatingly, he cried out in a hollow, tremulous voice:

'Nay, pity me, good master, I pray you. Out of my dutiful love for you I am willing to serve you in any way you may desire.'

A sneer of contempt passed over the sinister face of Bothwell, as, sheathing his dagger, he answered:

'Good, thou hast saved thy life. But swear by thy immortal soul that thou wilt serve me truly, and betray me not.'

'By my immortal soul I swear not to betray you, and I will serve you faithfully,' Paris said.

'Rise and go,' said Bothwell, 'thy reward shall be commensurate with thy service.'

Paris needed no second bidding. He rose to his feet, and kissed the Earl's hand in token of his complete submission; and then, having received lengthy instructions from Bothwell, he took his departure.

The Earl strode about his apartment for some time in moody silence. The words of his man Paris had not fallen altogether on barren soil. He was perfectly conscious that he had entered on a desperate undertaking, from which retreat was now impossible, and which might involve him in great trouble.

Moreover, he knew that he was surrounded with enemies, for though he stood high in the Queen's favour and had gained great power, he was not popular, but was hated and feared, and there were those who would rejoice at being able to crush him. Amongst them was Renaud. The Earl had at first been rather struck with the physician, but two equally grasping and equally unscrupulous men cannot get on together; and Bothwell would indeed have been a fool if he had failed to perceive that he had an intriguing antagonist in Renaud.

'You think to get me into your clutches, Master Renaud,' he muttered savagely between clenched teeth; 'but an I should fail to send you to heaven in company with his Majesty the King, I will so draw your fangs that you will be harmless evermore.'

CHAPTER XLIV.

BEARDED BY ONE WHO FEARED HIM NOT.

THE winter day was growing dark on February 9, in the year 1567, as the Earl of Bothwell, in his own apartments at Holyrood, held a secret meeting with his confederates in the dreadful plot that was to culminate that night in the death of the King. The arch-conspirator gazed round to see that all his accomplices were present, and then he said:

'Gentlemen, the hour nearly approaches when, for the credit of our country and the honour of our Queen, we must strike the blow that will make itself felt throughout the length and breadth of the land, and shall be recounted as a great deed by generations yet unborn. My worthy friend there, the Queen's favourite physician, Monsieur Renaud,' he remarked pointedly, and with unmistakable significance, 'was the first to suggest to me that the Queen's Majesty suffered from a grievous malady.' Renaud knew what this pointed allusion meant. It was intended to bring him prominently before the conspirators as one of the proposers of the deed, so that *he* at any rate should have no chance of escape in the event of revelations being made.

'I asked him,' Bothwell continued, 'what was a fitting remedy for the Queen's malady, and he hesitated not to say the taking off of the King was the only remedy likely to be effectual.'

Renaud winced, and scowled defiantly at his antagonist, against whom his hatred strengthened. But determining not to let Bothwell have all the say, he smiled bitterly and remarked :

‘My Lord of Bothwell will pardon me for setting him right. Accurate in most things, his memory has somewhat failed him on this important point. It is true I told him the Queen’s Majesty was sorely afflicted, whereupon my Lord Bothwell suggested that the King might be the cause, to which I assented ; and then my lord desired to know if I had no potent drug that would cure this King’s malady from which her Majesty suffered. But I was fain to answer him no ; whereat he was angered, and expressed himself that it were better for the Queen’s peace if the King should be taken to heaven.’

Bothwell writhed under this lashing, and he felt that he was bearded by one who feared him not, and who was destined to be a standing menace in his path, unless he could remove him. He did not show his anger, but he made reply with cutting irony :

‘Monsieur Renaud is such a worthy gentleman, and withal so very honest, that he desires not to rob me of the honour of having proposed this plot, in which he has already taken such an active part. But his exceeding great modesty will, I am sure, not prevent you, my friends, from bestowing the honour where the honour is due.’

Renaud flashed fiery red at this home-thrust, and would probably have made an angry retort had not Laird James of Ormiston interposed by exclaiming :

‘A truce to these recriminations, gentlemen. It is mere childishness. We have great business on hand. Let us despatch it like men.’

This timely remark stilled the rising tempest for a time, and Bothwell proceeded to allot to each conspirator the part he had to play in the dreadful nocturnal tragedy. A few hours later several of the conspirators stole cautiously from the palace carrying with them bags of gunpowder. They went as far as Blackfriars Wynd, where they delivered up their burdens to other conspirators, who were waiting, and by them they were borne to Balfour’s house, in Kirk-o’-Fields, where Paris was ready to receive them. In the meantime the Queen, Bothwell, Renaud and others had gone to the house,

and were sitting with the King, in the room beneath which the powder was being emptied in heaps on the floor ready for the fatal moment when the torch should be applied.

It was ten o'clock when Paris entered the King's chamber, his appearance being the signal that all was prepared. Then the Queen informed her husband that she had promised to attend a masquerade given in Holyrood Palace in honour of the marriage of two of her favourite servants. She took farewell of him, and, in company with Bothwell and the members of her household, she proceeded to the palace by torchlight.

Darnley was stricken with grief and secret fear as he saw her depart, for some presentiment of his coming doom seemed to weigh heavily upon him. He was strangely restless and unhappy, and turned to the Bible for consolation, and having read one of the most beautiful of the Psalms, he went to bed and fell asleep, a young page by the name of Taylor lying in the same apartment with him.

While the King thus slept, all unconscious of the danger that menaced him, the ball in the palace proceeded merrily, and Bothwell, attired in a costly costume of black velvet and satin, danced a minuet with the Queen, and remained until near midnight. Then he stole away, and changed his rich clothes for a dress of common homespun, and left his apartments in company with Renaud, Paris and other confederates. They went stealthily down the staircase which led from Holyrood into the Queen's garden, and directed their course to the southern gate. The gate was guarded by two sentinels, who, surprised to see a party of men coming along this unusual path at so late an hour, cried out :

'Who goes there ?'

'Friends,' answered one of the conspirators.

'Whose friends ?'

'Friends of Lord Bothwell.'

'Pass, friends of Lord Bothwell,' said the soldiers, as they grounded their hackbuts.

The confederates left the palace behind them, and proceeded up the Canongate, to the Netherbow gate, which they found shut, but the gatekeeper was commanded to 'open the post to friends of Lord Bothwell,' and this command being complied with they passed on. When they reached Blackfriars Wynd, Bothwell, Renaud and Paris left the others, and

proceeded alone to Kirk-o'-Fields, and on reaching the house where the King was lodged, Bothwell and Paris concealed themselves in the garden, and Renaud, by pre-arrangement, entered the house by means of the false keys. He had been told off to see that no hitch had occurred, and that the two murderers who were concealed within the house did their work effectually. These men were Hepburn and Hay, of Galls, and as it had been considered probable that the explosion might not kill the King, these two men were deputed to strangle him and the page Taylor. Bothwell had another and sinister motive in sending Renaud in, and this was no other than to destroy Renaud also. The Earl had made a compact with Hepburn and Hay that when Renaud entered some excuse was to be framed to induce him to go into the cellar, and once in, the door was to be fastened upon him, and he would thus be involved in the explosion.

It was a very dark night, and the air seemed to be filled with sobbing sounds like those which in certain states of the atmosphere manifest themselves before rain. Renaud entered cautiously. All was silent as the grave. There was no light save that afforded by the feeble rays of the night lamps which burned in the King's room, and there being no door at the bottom of the stairs communicating with the upper and lower part of the house, the gleam of the lamp was visible.

The two hired men were lying on the floor in the lower room, but they rose noiselessly as their accomplice came in, and they entered into whispered conversation with him. They then induced him to go into the cellar to bring up a bag of powder, which they said had been left there. While he went on this errand they were to steal upstairs and perform their hideous work. Renaud groped his way to the cellar, where he was about to strike a light with flint and steel, in order to see where the powder was. But before he could do this the door was suddenly closed, and when he tried to open it he found it was fastened. Instantly a clammy horror seized him, for he knew that he had been trapped and would be killed like a rat in a cage.

No sooner had the two men thus caught their victim than they hurried upstairs. They were excited, and no doubt made more noise than they intended, for the King was aroused, and realizing instantly that treachery was at work, he sprang out of bed in his shirt and pelisse and endeavoured to force his

way past the assassins. But they seized him instantly, and with ferocious fury strangled him. Disturbed by the commotion, the page rose up in his bed, and, frenzied with horror, tried to scream out, but he was seized and throttled before he could cry or make the slightest resistance.

The ghastly work being so far completed, the assassins carried their victims down and deposited their bodies in an orchard close by. Hepburn then returned into the house and lighted the match which communicated with the powder, and then he hurried out to join Bothwell and the others, and they all retired for some distance to await the effects of the explosion. It was nearly a quarter of an hour before it occurred, for the match had been timed to burn for at least ten minutes.

Bothwell was deeply agitated, for this night's work would make him or mar him. The King was dead, so that between him and the Queen there was no longer a barrier, and his passionate ambition might at last be gratified. The only enemy he now feared was Renaud, and he was imprisoned in the cellar, and in another few minutes he would be blown to fragments. Then, if all went well and no awkward revelation should be made, the wicked and designing Earl would share the throne with the Queen and gain the power he craved. But the little word 'if' stood in the way, and it was destined to wreck all his hopes. Cold as the night was he was bathed in profuse perspiration, and he took off his bonnet that the air might blow upon his hot throbbing temples. Then suddenly the solid earth seemed to tremble; a mass of dazzling white flame burst forth in the darkness, and out of its midst rose a huge, dense blood-red cloud of smoke. The powder had done its work. The King was slain, the house was wrecked, and a deed had been done that night that was destined for evermore to form a dark page in Scotland's history.

As soon as the explosion had taken place the confederates hurried back to the palace, being challenged as before, but gaining admittance without let or hindrance. Bothwell went to his room, and swallowed at a draught a huge beaker of wine. Then hastily undressing, he flung himself, tired and weary, on his bed and tried to sleep.

CHAPTER XLV.

‘ I GRASP THE SCEPTRE AT LAST.’

LORD BOTHWELL wooed sweet sleep in vain. He was weary with long watching, jaded with extraordinary physical exertion, and haggard with keen mental anxiety, and yet the rest he so much needed he could not obtain. His brain was in a whirl, as well it might be; nevertheless he experienced a sense of fleeting joy as he contemplated that awful night’s work. His opponent and the man he feared, Renaud, was dead; so also was the King. And now the Queen’s hand and throne should be his, though he had to wade through a river of blood to reach them.

Thus he thought as he lay there feverish and restless, and longing for the oppressive darkness to pass away, and for the daylight to come.

Presently, with startling suddenness, the echoes were awakened by a hammering on his door. The Earl turned pale as he rose up and listened. He was a daring man and fearless; but now that impatient knocking somehow sent a chill over him, and produced a fluttering sensation at his heart. The knocking was repeated with more energy, more impatience.

What could it mean at such an hour? To the Earl it was full of import, and seemed to menace him with deadly danger. He sprang from his bed as for the third time the knocker thundered at the door. The Earl seized in one hand his long rapier, which he always kept beside his bed, and in the other his night lamp. Then he flung the door open, and beheld a ghost holding a flaming torch, whose light filled the room with a weird glare, and called strange shadows into being. That is to say, it was a ghost if Monsieur Renaud was dead, for the figure was that of Renaud. His face was pale as marble. His lips were curled with a contemptuous meaning smile, and his eyes were filled with a look of fierce hate.

Bothwell visibly staggered, and, for an instant losing his presence of mind and habitual coolness, he cried in a hollow voice :

‘ Who art thou? Comest thou from the grave?’

The bitter, cynical smile of the figure’s face deepened into

a sneer, and there came the answer with provoking coolness :

'My Lord Bothwell, the King's house is blown up, and I trow the King is slain.'

Bothwell knew then that it was Renaud in the flesh who spoke, and his presence of mind and coolness returned.

'Gad's truth !' he exclaimed, as he instantly commenced to dress himself, 'but this is sorry news an thou art serious. There is treason abroad and we must see to it. Rouse the palace, Monsieur Renaud. I will join you anon.'

Not to be outdone by the other's coolness and impudence, Renaud answered :

'Good, my lord. We must make effort to discover the villains who have done this thing. An I mistake not the executioner will have a busy time of it ere long. To slay a King is a mighty crime and must not go unpunished.'

Bothwell felt that he was being thrashed with his own whip, that the bold man before him was virtually his master, and certainly his equal in audacity and skill in villainy. But, nevertheless, he knew that to openly quarrel with him would be a very dangerous proceeding. A man so proficient in cunning must be met by cunning. An eagle was not to be caught by a limed twig. Bothwell had congratulated himself that Renaud had accompanied the King into the next world. Yet here he was solid and sound in the flesh, to the Earl's mortification and chagrin. But he did not show his chagrin, he knew that would betray weakness, nor did he directly or indirectly seek to know how his opponent had escaped from the trap in which he seemed to have been so securely caught.

The significance of Renaud's words was not lost upon Bothwell, who said as the other was turning away, 'Monsieur, I owe thee a debt of gratitude. Thou hast proved thyself staunch and faithful in the past ; be no less so in the future, and by my right hand I swear that *when I am King* thou shalt be little less than I !'

The marble face of Renaud lighted up with an expression of triumphant malice, as, raising the torch above his head so that its flickering glare brought his enemy into bold relief, he said in slow, emphatic, and pointed words : ' My lord of Bothwell, thy tongue, like thy heart, is false as hell. When thou art King there will be one still more powerful in this Court. I shall be that one. I, Renaud, whom thou wished to have sent

after the King; but thanks to the rottenness of the bolts wherewith thy slaves would have imprisoned me and the strength of mine own shoulders, I burst my prison just in time to escape the journey and thwart thy machinations.'

Bothwell was a little disconcerted, but he kept his countenance, and, continuing to dress himself with the utmost coolness, made answer;

'Good Master Renaud, the road you and I would travel is broad enough for us both. Let us not elbow each other. Thou hast come to years of discretion; see to it that thy tongue be wise, and doubt not that thy dearest wish and thy loftiest ambition shall be gratified. Do me the favour of alarming the palace, as it be not already alarmed, and we will investigate this dreadful business. In a quarter of an hour we will to the Queen's Majesty to report the sad news.'

Renaud made no reply by words, but his looks declared what his thoughts were. He turned away, and in a short time there were excitement and commotion throughout the palace, and the word 'Treason' flew from lip to lip, until there was the clang of steel and the clash of arms as the soldiers and guards buckled on their armour. The Queen, roused by her female attendants, rose from her bed and hastily attired herself in a loose robe. She was deadly pale, and looked haggard and careworn, and when a few minutes later she admitted to her presence Lord Bothwell, the Earl of Huntly, and Renaud she was visibly trembling, and so agitated that her maids had to support her to a seat.

Bothwell, who was bareheaded, knelt on one knee before her, and bowing his head so that she could not see his face, he said:

'Your Majesty, it is my sad duty, as your Majesty's humble and dutiful servant, to convey to your Majesty a sad and heavy piece of news, which cutteth me to the heart to have the telling of.'

'Speak out, my Lord of Bothwell,' cried the Queen in alarm, as Bothwell paused. 'What is it thou hast to tell? Has there been treason done?'

'Ay, in truth, your Majesty; treason of a foul and odious type. Some desperate villains have made a sorrowful day for your Grace, and have taken off your royal husband.'

'Murdered him?' the Queen gasped, while her face blanched to snowy whiteness.

‘Even so, your Majesty. He hath been cruelly done to death, and, as I am informed, the house wherein he was lodged hath been blown into the air.’

At this information her Majesty gave a groan and swooned. Leaving Renaud and the maids to give attention to the Queen, Bothwell hastily withdrew, a cold smile playing about his thin lips. Then, with consummate audacity, he collected a large body of soldiers, and repaired with them to the scene of the crime. A tremendous crowd had gathered in Kirk-o-Fields. They filled the orchard, where the bodies still lay, and examined with idle curiosity the still smoking ruins of the wrecked house.

As soon as Bothwell came upon the scene he dispersed the crowd with brutal harshness, ordering his soldiers to ride over those who were tardy in getting out of the way. This done, he had the bodies of the King and the page lifted and wrapped in a sheet, and conveyed them into a neighbouring house, a strong guard being placed, with instructions not to allow anyone under any circumstances whatever to examine the corpses. Then he rode back to the palace. He was gloomy and silent; but once his habitual cold smile spread itself over his pale face, and he muttered to himself:

‘I grasp the sceptre at last!’

CHAPTER XLVI.

THE MOCK TRIAL.

IF the Queen really experienced any sorrow at the death of Darnley, she soon got over it, though for a time she affected to be deeply cast down, and would admit no one but Bothwell into her presence. Public indignation soon began to make itself heard like the mutterings of a rising storm, and anonymous placards were posted about in which Bothwell was openly accused of the murder, and several of the Queen’s servants and followers were named as accomplices, amongst them being Renaud.

Alarmed by the manifest signs of the people’s wrath, the Queen quitted Edinburgh in company with Bothwell and a strong guard, and took up her residence at Seton Castle, the princely residence of Lord Seton. From here she despatched

a special messenger to request the return of Adrienne de Bois, Basile the Jester, and François.

Adrienne de Bois lost no time in obeying the summons, but Basile, for certain reasons, refused to return. François, in accordance with a promise he had made to his foster-mother, had communicated with her, and so she immediately sent him word of the Queen's wishes, and prayed him, in his own interests, to go at once to Seton Castle, as her Majesty desired.

Amongst those who availed themselves of the state of public feeling to return to the capital, in defiance of her Majesty's orders, was Bomcester, the old fanatic. He relied on the indignation that had been stirred up against the Court to live secure from the Queen's anger. He felt sure that in the then state of popular opinion he would have no difficulty in rallying around him a number of powerful followers. Nor was he mistaken, and he very soon found himself at the head of a strong party, whose hatred for Catholicism and anger against the Queen and Bothwell made them dangerous. Bomcester began at once to intrigue, and he was instrumental in issuing a proclamation which was secretly affixed on the cross in the market-place. In this bill Bothwell and the Queen were openly accused of being accessories to the murder of the King. The proclamation wound up with an exhortation to the populace to 'fast and pray,' and it called on God to 'reveal and revenge.'

When Bothwell heard of this he became furious; and selecting fifty of his most redoubtable warriors, they armed themselves to the teeth, and then, bestriding powerful horses, they rode, with Bothwell at their head, to Edinburgh, his object being to intimidate the people. Collecting his warriors around him at the Market Cross, he publicly declared that if he could discover the authors of the proclamation he would 'wash his hands in their blood.' A surging multitude had gathered in the streets, but no one dared molest those stern soldiers, although muttered threats were heard, and the smouldering anger displayed itself occasionally by groans and hisses.

Although for a moment Bothwell had cowed the people, he had by no means stilled their tongues, and, urged by Bomcester, they soon grew louder than ever in their denunciations.

The Earl of Lennox, the father of the murdered Darnley, was stricken with grief and burning with indignation, and he made repeated applications to the Queen that the persons

suspected of the crime should be put upon their trial, and at last, so importunate did he become that her Majesty consented that Lord Bothwell should be arraigned.

From the first, however, it was intended that this trial should be a mere farce, though it was hoped that by making a show of justice the anger of the populace would be appeased.

In due course the trial opened at the Tolbooth, and the tribunal was presided over by the Earl of Argyle, who had been a party to the murder, but who was at this time Lord High Justice. He himself was guarded by two hundred hack-buffers, while four thousand of Bothwell's retainers, armed to the teeth, mustered in the squares and the streets leading to the Court-house. An angry crowd surged restlessly, like a storm-lashed sea, in the principal streets, while open menaces and deep-toned threats were uttered, but the formidable array of force which the accused Earl had gathered together overawed the people, who, nevertheless, would have risen in a body and deluged the gutters with blood had they been boldly led by daring men; but these leaders were not forthcoming, and so the lowering storm did not break.

The accused Bothwell rode up to the Court in pomp and state. He was mounted on a superb gray horse that had belonged to the deceased King, and had been a great favourite with him. It was gaily trapped with scarlet cloth, trimmed with gold fringe. Bothwell wore a silver breast plate over a buff jerkin that was slashed with red. And he had on long yellow riding boots, ornamented with gold spurs. Although nominally he was a prisoner, it was noticed that he wore a formidable dagger at his belt, and surrounding him was a troop of his most trusted soldiers.

As he rode along, his pale face betraying contempt and scorn, he bowed defiantly now and again to the crowd, but when one or two bolder spirits than the rest ventured to hoot at him, his eyes flashed angrily, and he seemed inclined to order his men to ride over the mob. But he checked himself fortunately, for there is little doubt slaughter would have ensued.

The public accuser of the Earl of Bothwell was the Earl of Lennox, father of the murdered King; but when on his way to the Court with a large gathering of friends, a Queen's messenger was despatched to him to say he would not be allowed to enter the city with more than six retainers. On

receipt of this order, he saw at once the utter uselessness of persevering in his charge, and resolutely refused to appear at the Court unless all his friends accompanied him. „Nevertheless he sent forward one of his confidential retainers, named Robert Cunningham, instructing him to publicly state the reason that Lennox could not appear, and to sustain the charge against the accused. Although Cunningham was listened to, it was ruled that his charge in the absence of Lennox could not be upheld, and Bothwell having pleaded not guilty, he was unanimously acquitted, the announcement being received by his partisans in Court with uproarious cheering. When the tumult ceased, however, there rose up in the public part of the Court a strange figure—the figure of a grim, grizzled, gaunt old man, with white cadaverous face, around which circled long rusty gray locks of hair. His eyes, deep sunk in his head and underlined by dark shadows, seemed to glitter like burnished steel, as raising his thin arm aloft, with the long index finger pointing heavenward, he cried out in a sepulchral voice :

‘Woe is this day, woe is this day; and the wrath of the Lord will of a surety smite this sinful city. The King’s murderer and the Queen’s seducer stands there, and yet you have let him free of any penalty for his great crimes. Shame on you for deceitful knaves! I call the Lord to witness that you are false to your oaths, and that you are aiders and abettors of that blood-stained criminal. The Queen and her followers are corrupt; her Court is a sink of iniquity, and the vengeance of the Lord will fall upon them!’

The speaker was Bomcester, the fanatic. His strange appearance and bold words startled everyone, even Bothwell’s face blanching. Instantly there ensued a scene of excitement and confusion, and in a deep coarse voice Bothwell thundered out :

‘Is there no one who will break the mazard of that mad fool who thus reviles the sacred person of our beloved Queen and mocks the solemnity of this Hall of Justice?’

Instantly a dozen of his followers drew their weapons and endeavoured to force their way to the spot where old Bomcester still stood in an attitude of defiance, and with both his long, scraggy arms raised above his head, as if he were calling down a curse upon his opponents.

All was now uproar. The Court guards vainly tried to

preserve order, but the air was filled with the shrieks of women and the angry growls of men, and the crowd struggled furiously to get out, fearing injury at the hands of the on-pressing soldiers. Bothwell himself sprang forward amongst his men, and, unsheathing his dagger, endeavoured to reach Bomcester, who undoubtedly would have fallen a prey to the fury he had evoked had not a young man, clad in a buff jerkin and trunk-hose, and with his face partially concealed by massive curls that completely covered the forehead and eyes, elbowed his way forward by a supreme effort, and, seizing Bomcester, dragged him down into the struggling crowd, who when they found that the old man was being rescued gave way, and allowed the rescuer and the fanatic to get clear off. So great was the excitement and confusion, and so deafening the uproar, that no orders could be heard, and though Bothwell and his men tried to press forward they failed to make way against the solid human barrier, and at last Bothwell, seeing Bomcester disappear in the struggling mass, deemed it prudent not to render the already incensed people still more furious by spilling blood. He therefore signalled to his followers to restrain themselves. The young man was thus enabled to get Bomcester into the street, and then he hurried him along until they reached a quiet and deserted square, where, panting and exhausted, the old man stopped, and leaned wearily against the iron railings of a house.

‘Thy indiscretion has come near costing thee thy life,’ said the rescuer. ‘Thou art safe so far. Go thy ways, and be wiser in the future!’

Pale as ‘pale death,’ and weak and trembling in all his limbs, the fanatic, his eyes glaring with an unnatural light, drew himself up with difficulty, and in a voice all aquiver he answered:

‘I am doing the service of the Lord, and I have no fear. These Papists are an abomination in the land, and a fiery sword from heaven shall smite them hip and thigh. Rottenness and corruption are everywhere, and fire and blood alone can purge them away. The people groan under an iron bondage that is cankering into their very souls; but they shall rend their shackles and hurl these iniquitous nobles and the shameless Queen to perdition. But tell me who thou art? Thou hast rendered me some service, and I fain would reward thee. If thou art poor I will bestow a coin upon thee, and if

thou needest not that, then thou shalt have such poor thanks as I can give thee. Come, tell me thy name !

The young man seemed to hesitate for some moments. Then, with a sudden impulse, he dashed the mass of false hair from his forehead, and removing his cap, exclaimed :

‘Thou knowest me well ! I am François, and if thou art indebted to me I claim as my reward the hand of thy fair daughter, Lilian.’

Bomcester was amazed, and tottered against the railings. François made a motion to assist him, but he steadied himself and answered :

‘Art thou in league with the evil one that thou wert able to appear at such a moment and do this thing ? Thy hand, boy ! I am glad to see thee ! How fares it with thee, and whence comest thou ?’

‘I am a waif, drifting hither and thither as fortune wills, my way lighted by one dazzling star, that star thy daughter !’

‘Thou art still hankering after my child,’ said the fanatic, resuming his old domineering manner. ‘But an thou wouldst win her, prove thy devotion by renouncing thy devil’s creed, and by joining the ranks of those who are sworn to destroy the Queen and her foul Court !’

‘Sir,’ said François proudly, ‘I have saved thy life, and in return thou counsellest me to do outrage to my feelings and to be false to my Queen !’

‘Thou hast perhaps saved my life, and since thou art poor I will reward thee. Come to my house, and thou shalt have a piece of gold ; but my daughter is not for one who serves Satan !’

François drew himself up proudly, and with scorn and contempt in his tone and manner he made answer :

‘Keep thy gold, I would not touch it. Thou promised to give me Lilian for my wife. Thou hast broken that promise, and I want naught else from thee. Farewell.’ He turned and hurried away, and though old Bomcester called to him, he either did not heed or did not hear, for, turning a corner, he was speedily lost to sight.

‘He is wilful and wayward, but the Lord will chasten him, the Lord will chasten him,’ the fanatic muttered, as with tottering steps he went towards his house.

CHAPTER XLVII.

‘GENTLEMEN, I DRINK TO YOU. WHEN NEXT WE ASSEMBLE I TRUST YOU WILL BE ABLE TO GREET ME AS YOUR KING.’

WHEN Bothwell found that the strange old man who had caused the disturbance in the Court had been hustled away, he ceased to trouble himself further, and restrained his men from pursuing Bomcester, who, by the way, had not been recognised by any of the officials. Most of the general public, however, knew him, and not only applauded his boldness, but assisted in his escape.

Bothwell's acquittal, while it did not cause surprise to the majority of the people, who knew perfectly well that his judges were corrupt, produced nevertheless a feeling of deep exasperation, although no one dare show this feeling then. But there were those who, if they were silent, were none the less determined, and secret oaths were registered that day which boded ill for the future peace of the unfortunate Queen and her guilty favourite. Mary lost no time in showing openly that she was infatuated with the Earl of Bothwell, and not only did she raise him in power, by giving him the lordship and castle of Dunbar, but she extended his power as High Admiral. His craft and ambition, however, were not satisfied. He aimed still higher. From the very first he cast his eyes on the throne, and nothing short of that goal would satisfy his aspirations. He was determined to marry the Queen, and with that end in view he set to work to obtain a divorce from his lawful wife, Lady Jane Gordon, her own brother, the Earl of Huntly, consenting to, and abetting in, this infamous proceeding, on condition that certain estates which had been confiscated should be restored to him.

Meantime, the Queen, blinded by her guilty passion, became utterly indifferent to the prayers and entreaties of many of her loyal subjects who loved her, and who, foreseeing the danger in which she was placing herself, hesitated not to warn her. Amongst those who spoke freely was Adrienne de Bois. She had returned in obedience to the Queen's summons, and being restored to her former confidential position, she cautioned the Queen against Bothwell. Her Majesty listened impatiently to these warnings, but was in no way

influenced by them. She expressed great indignation and some anger that François had chosen to ignore her summons to return, and she commanded Adrienne to communicate with him, and bid him come back; on his failing to do so, perpetual banishment from the kingdom would be pronounced against him. Neither the Queen's commands nor his foster-mother's entreaties, however, availed with François, who for many reasons resolved to keep away from the Court for the present, the most potent of these reasons, perhaps, being the conviction that if he returned he must for ever abandon hope of gaining Lilian. Moreover, he felt that he could not possibly play the hypocrite any longer by keeping up the fiction of being the son of Renaud, whom he detested and loathed now for his duplicity and guilty intrigues.

Since her return to the Court, Adrienne had studiously avoided Renaud, and had openly expressed her dislike of him to the Queen, who was also prejudiced on account of the warnings she had so mysteriously received. In fact, Bothwell himself was desirous of getting Renaud out of the way, and so lost no opportunity of turning the Queen's mind against him. But Renaud was not so easily shaken off. He knew his power, and was determined to hold his own in the face of all.

One day the Queen informed him that she intended to despatch him on a special mission to the Court of France. This project had been suggested to her by Bothwell, who deemed it the safest way to get rid of his rival. But Renaud was too cute to be deceived by any such shallow device, and he made answer to her Majesty:

'I am conscious, your Grace, of the high honour you would confer upon me, and of the confidence you repose in me; but, your Majesty, I am unfitted for this special mission, and I crave you select from your Court someone more able to carry out your Majesty's commands.'

'How now, sirrah!' cried the Queen, in high dudgeon. 'Dost thou dare to refuse compliance with our royal commands?'

'I simply decline, with deep respect, the honour your Grace wishes to do me,' Renaud replied firmly.

'Then thou art no longer our servant, and will leave our Court instantly,' exclaimed her Majesty with burning anger.

‘No, your Grace,’ answered Renaud, with imperturbable demeanour. ‘I remain here ; for an I go I drag down your favourite, the Earl of Bothwell, with me. I have such evidence in my possession that a word from me would cause your Majesty’s restless subjects to rend him to pieces, and possibly hurl even your Majesty from your throne.’

The Queen grew deadly pale at these bold words. She was humiliated and crushed ; but feeling that she was in this man’s power, she recognised that it would be folly to quarrel with him, so she merely remarked :

‘Have a care, sirrah, or thy base insinuations may bring thee into trouble. Leave our presence, and we will select someone more worthy to do our mission.’

This was the first time the Queen had openly shown anger towards Renaud, and she resolved from that moment to endeavour to render him harmless, and by some means to deprive him of his power. He on his part was by no means disconcerted. With infinite conceit in himself, and a belief that his knowledge of the King’s murder gave him absolute power, he smiled as he left the Queen’s presence, and thought to himself, ‘You are a puppet, madame ; and for a puppet you use unpardonable language. We who wield the power will teach you your proper place.’

This was bold and daring for a man of his origin, and contrasted strangely with his humbleness on that night in Paris, when in the wretched garret near Notre Dame, and in the presence of the dead woman, he resolved to use to his own aggrandisement the secret her death placed in his possession. During the years that had passed he had never faltered in his purpose, until from a poverty-stricken waif he had risen to power and place, and was able to dictate to the Queen in her own palace. But her Majesty had come at last, and influenced no doubt by the recent warnings, to see how false he was, and how dangerous to her peace and safety.

Like most men who rise to position by fraud and deceit, Renaud began to forget that discretion was imperatively necessary in order to maintain that which he had won. Having had the impudence to defy the Queen, he resolved on subduing Adrienne, and compelling her to become his wife ; and having failed to get her to grant him an interview, he conceived the idea of carrying her off with the aid of his creature Bastian and, by imprisoning her somewhere, compel-

ling her to consent to his wishes. The opportunity for doing this, however, was not favourable at present. But he nursed the scheme, and determined to put it into execution at no distant date.

While the adventurer Renaud was thus trying to consolidate his own position, and to realize his ambitious schemes, the Earl of Bothwell was pursuing a precisely similar course in regard to himself. These two men hated each other with venomous hatred, and yet each was afraid to show it. Renaud, on his part, manifested the most obsequious and fulsome fawning towards his rival, but this was only to gain his ends. The Earl, on the other hand, was austere and patronizing, but watched for the chance to have the man whom of all others he most hated secretly assassinated. Renaud was no doubt aware of the danger in which he stood, for not only did he wear a steel shirt beneath his clothes, but he never went about without being well armed, while his creature Bastian followed him like a shadow. The devotion of this man for his master was one of those human riddles which are not easily solved. Bastian regarded his employer almost in the light of a demi-god, and was ready at any moment to peril his own life in his behalf. But it must be remembered that the Italian was a mere human animal, with no other desires than to pander to and satisfy the lowest instincts of his nature; and as Renaud allowed him to do this to the fullest extent, the man had much of the dog's fidelity for its master. Bastian was too illiterate, too small-brained to comprehend any of the great problems of life. He was a mere savage, and had all the cunning and ferocity peculiar to the savage. In this respect, therefore, he was a valuable tool, and Renaud knew only too well how to use him; and together these two concocted a plot to carry off Adrienne de Bois. She, on her part, had come to dread him, and avoided him in every possible way, more especially as she had pledged herself to become the wife of Basile the Jester. Had she not been recalled to the Court she would have been married before this, but obeying that call out of her love and friendship for the Queen, and finding that she could not persuade him to return so long as Renaud was there, she left him with a solemn promise to be his, and to endeavour to get her Majesty to consent to the union.

This, then, was the position of affairs at the Court of Queen

Mary, as she, blinded by infatuation, marched on to her doom; and Bothwell, cold-blooded and unscrupulous as he was, was determined to share the throne with her. Society from the highest to the lowest was undermined by secret intrigue. Every man's hand seemed to be against his neighbour; justice was a burlesque, and there was no protection for either life or property. Elizabeth of England, actuated by jealousy and hatred, was plotting against Mary of Scotland, whose kingdom was disorganized, and whose people were in a state little short of anarchy. And taking advantage of all this, the audacious Bothwell, with autocratic despotism, made a veritable *coup d'état* in order to gain the power he was craving for. Accordingly he took advantage of the rising of Parliament to invite some of the most powerful nobles in the land to a supper which was given in a tavern in Edinburgh. During the progress of the feast, two hundred of Bothwell's staunchest hackbutterers surrounded the house by prearrangement with their master, who then rose, and producing a written warrant which he stated was written by the hand of the Queen, and empowered him to inform the nobility that she had selected him for her husband, he asked them to ratify that by appending their names to the warrant.

This announcement fell like a bombshell on the entrapped and astonished noblemen, and a scene of extraordinary confusion ensued. Swords and daggers were drawn, and an attempt was made by some of the company to leave the room, but Bothwell sprang on to a stool, and in stentorian tones cried out :

‘ My lords and gentlemen, escape is impossible. The house is surrounded by a band of my most stalwart fighting men, and they have stringent orders to cut down anyone attempting to leave. If you value your lives, therefore, bide where you are, and listen to reason.’

Consternation fell upon everyone present, but one and all, to their eternal disgrace, consented to sign the bond in which they declared their conviction of Bothwell's innocence, promised to defend him against all traducers, and recommended ‘ this noble and mighty lord ’ as a suitable husband for the Queen, whose continuance in solitary widowhood was, they said, injurious to the interests of the commonwealth. They further engaged to maintain Bothwell's pretensions to the Queen's hand with their lives and fortunes, and if they

failed to perform their promise, to pass for men devoid of honour and loyalty, and as unworthy traitors.*

Amongst those who appended their signatures to this infamous document were the Bishops of St. Andrew's, Aberdeen, Dumblane, Brechin, Ross, and Orkney, besides many leading nobles of the land.

When Bothwell had thus effected his purpose, by a boldness and audacity which were worthy of the man, he folded the precious paper up and secured it in the breast of his doublet. Then he filled a beaker with wine, and with brazen impudence said :

'Gentlemen, I drink to you. When next we assemble, I trust you will be able to greet me as your king.'

The day was dawning before the nobles separated. Many of them were muddled with the fumes of wine, whilst others were depressed and sullen at having been so humiliated ; but all, except Bothwell's partisans, felt that they had done outrage to their consciences, that the future was dark, and that that night's work boded ill for the distracted kingdom.

In the pearl-gray light of the dawning day the Earl of Bothwell, escorted by a troop of his soldiers, wended his way to his lodgings, chuckling with glee at the success of his plot, and congratulating himself on the near realization of his daring scheme.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

'TWINX HOPE AND FEAR.

BASILE the Jester experienced a considerable degree of uneasiness, not to say unhappiness, when Adrienne de Bois announced her intention of returning to the Court of Queen Mary. He naturally felt that the chances were that she might be lost to him ; and under any circumstances she could hardly escape annoyance at the hands of his old enemy, Renaud.

During their stay in Berwick, the Jester had proved himself one of the most devoted and chivalrous of lovers. He had pleaded to her to become his wife so that he might have the right to shield her from persecution, and she, yielding to this pleading, consented to an early marriage ; but subse-

* Students of history need not be reminded that, strange and startling as is the incident here introduced, it is historically true. u

quently she begged that the marriage might be delayed, as she was extremely anxious to have the Queen's sanction. When Adrienne heard that her Majesty had returned to her capital with restored power, she quite resolved at all hazards to go and see the Queen, and, throwing herself at her feet, crave forgiveness for any wrong she might have done. But before she could carry out this idea, she received information that her Majesty wished her to go back. Adrienne was overjoyed at this, thinking that Basile would return with her, and that as soon as ever the Queen's permission was obtained, which Adrienne did not doubt would be readily given, the marriage was to take place.

Basile, however, did not share her sanguine views, for he was absolutely certain that so long as Renaud enjoyed power his persecution would not cease. Besides, the Jester hated the man so intensely that he felt it a moral impossibility to live under the same roof with him. And so with bitter sorrow he said to Adrienne :

'If you deem it your duty to go, no word of mine shall be uttered to influence you to remain here. I have a strong faith in you, and feel sure that you will remain true to your promise. You are pledged to me as my future wife, and that pledge you will respect. But for me to return would be to walk directly into the lion's den, and to render myself impotent to smite the smiter. Nay, can you doubt for a single moment that my enemy would of a certainty destroy my life by means of some of his hireling cut-throats? This chance must not be given to him, and I must devote myself to seeking some means of tearing from him the mask of hypocrisy he has so long worn, and proclaiming him the knave and impostor he is. This thing I will do. How and when I know not yet, for until I have some substantial evidence that will cause me to be believed I must hold my peace.'

Adrienne failed not to see the force of her lover's argument, and she was quite as anxious as he was that Renaud should be exposed, though she could not help thinking that the task, so far as Basile was concerned, was a hopeless one. Nevertheless she agreed with the views he held, and so bidding him an affectionate farewell, and giving him assurance of her unalterable affection, she set off for Edinburgh.

When she had gone the poor Jester felt very dull and lonely ; the more so on account of the absence of François,

who, filled with romantic notions and a love of adventure, had got together a band of young men, numbering in all about a dozen, who, constituting them into a sort of vigilance committee, wandered about the country. The self-imposed mission of this little band was an ambitious one, inasmuch as it had for its object the detection of conspiracy directed against the Scottish Queen. François's daring and loyalty had inspired his companions, who thus, all unknown to her Majesty, exhibited warm devotion to her cause, although up to the present they had not accomplished much. Their plan of operation was to roam about the country singly and in disguise, or not, as circumstances might determine. They subsisted as best they could, finding food and shelter in the taverns, or craving hospitality from the monasteries, or the charitably disposed. Periodically they met at a given rendezvous, and recounted their adventures.

Of this little band of adventurous youths François was a moving spirit and the acknowledged head. While in the pursuit of his plan he had displayed marked ability, and a peculiar aptitude for adapting himself to circumstances and for overcoming difficulties. He had dogged the Queen's footsteps, all unknown to her of course, and was pleased to imagine that he was a sort of mysterious protector of her. He it was who, at Jedburgh, had penetrated to her private chamber and warned her against Renaud; and it was one of his band and his intimate friend who, during the baptismal festivities at Stirling Castle, assumed the character of a mummer, and pretended to tell the Queen's fortune by the lines in her hand. Later still François was present at the Tolbooth during the trial of Bothwell, and was thus enabled to save old Bomcester from the fury of the Earl's soldiers. This latter adventure was especially welcome to François, who felt that it might be the means of strengthening his position in regard to Lilian, who was to him as a star that dazzled. For her sake he was prepared to dare anything; and he resolved that if he had no chance of winning her, he would fling his life away in some mad adventure. Since leaving he had stolen back once to Berwick, where Lilian still remained, for her father did not deem it prudent to take her to Edinburgh with him. And though between him and his sister there was little or no affection, he had the most perfect faith in her as a sort of she dragon, who would watch over her charge with sleepless

vigilance ; and he believed that no mortal man would be able to approach Lilian save over Aunt Julie's body. But herein the old fanatic proved, as men have proved in all ages, that a woman has a weak spot which sooner or later is certain to be found out. François had found this spot out in Aunt Julie, and by flattering her he had been enabled to overcome her scruples, and thus obtain an interview with Lilian.

On the occasion referred to, when the youth had surreptitiously gone back to Berwick, he had been enabled, thanks to dear old Aunt Julie, to enjoy a long interview with Lilian, during which they had renewed their vows to each other, and though she had declared that she would never become his wife without her father's consent, she gave him cold comfort by solemnly promising that if she could not become his wife, no other man should possess her.

On this understanding François tore himself away from his loved one, feeling that hope had dwindled to a mere flickering gleam, for to obtain Bomcester's consent, except on the conditions which the old fanatic had laid down, was not at all likely, while the conditions he imposed were such that François felt that he would rather die than accept. To renounce his religion and prove false to his Queen was too great a sacrifice to make, even though the reward was to be Lilian. He had to ask himself whether he should declare for Love or Queen, and he unhesitatingly pronounced for Queen, although in so doing he did not abandon all hope that he might still win his loved Lilian.

Before taking his departure from Berwick he paid a visit to Basile, and from him learned that Adrienne had returned to the Court. This was by no means welcome news to the lad, who was painfully impressed with the idea that his good foster-mother was running great risk so long as Renaud remained at the Court ; for he did not doubt that Renaud, smarting under a sense of defeat and disappointment, would persecute her. In fact, his cowardly and spiteful nature might even prompt him to take her life in order to gratify his feelings of revenge.

Although François did not impart his fears to Basile, he could not conceal the fact that he was much distressed, and he stated his determination to return to Edinburgh and linger in the neighbourhood of the palace, in order that he might exercise some sort of watchfulness over his foster-mother.

‘If it were only possible to convince her Majesty how traitorous Renaud is,’ François observed, ‘there might be hope and happiness for us all. But the Queen seems infatuated with him, and is blinded to his faults.’

The youth did not know as he gave utterance to this thought that the Queen’s faith in her erstwhile favourite had been considerably shaken, otherwise he might have felt lighter hearted as he set out for the capital. But he sternly resolved to do everything that mortal man might do to undermine the power of Renaud ; and with the intimate knowledge which he possessed of the Court and the ways of the Queen, he began to think that by acting cautiously he might succeed even better than at first he had dared to hope. Of course he did not exactly know upon what plan he was going to proceed. In fact, it would have been difficult under the circumstances to have laid down any plan. He was a free lance, and chance might at any moment throw something in his way, for the times were marked by strange things. Intrigue and conspiracy were the order of the day, and he who kept his eyes open and watched silently and persistently might see and learn much that he could turn to his own advantage.

Some such feeling as this, no doubt, guided François as he started for Edinburgh, knowing that the prize he hoped to win was Lilian, but that so many chances were against him as to make the winning seem truly improbable. But he did not despair, and found consolation in the thought that ‘He who tempts Fortune boldly may secure her favours.’

CHAPTER XLIX.

THE QUEEN MAKES A BOLD PROCLAMATION.

THE Earl of Bothwell was a restless and impatient man, and having dared so much and gone so far, he was not likely to remain quiet until he had fully accomplished his nefarious designs. To marry the Queen was his great ambition, but he was not yet divorced from his wife, and Mary was in mourning for her murdered husband. Bothwell, however, was not likely to be deterred by such trifles as these. The Queen was blindly infatuated with him, and he knew it ; and he had acquired a power over her that was simply amazing. In his

presence she seemed to lose all sense of honour, of dignity and womanly chastity, and to forget even that imperial greatness which was her heritage, and in which the weal or woe of her country was involved. On the dissolute Earl she lavished the highest honours, and at last, in order to blind the people, she entered into a guilty compact with him, by which he was to make a show of forcibly abducting her.

She had gone to Stirling Castle to visit her infant son, and when returning to her capital she was met by Bothwell and six hundred of his followers, who took her and her retinue prisoners, and conducted them to the Castle of Dunbar, which the Earl had had specially prepared for her reception. Here the Scottish Queen passed some time, and in the meantime Bothwell hurried on his divorce, and by bribing the Archbishop of St. Andrew's, he succeeded in speedily obtaining a nullification of his marriage. On the very day that the judgment of the court was pronounced, Bothwell allowed the Queen to return to her capital; and he himself, with an assumption of dejection and humility, walked unarmed, holding the bridle of her horse. On reaching Edinburgh Mary publicly announced her intention of marrying her abductor. This announcement caused intense indignation amongst her subjects, even those who had been most staunch to her showing a disposition to revolt at this outrage against decency and honour.

Bomcester, the fanatic, heard the announcement with amazement, for even he had not thought it possible that her Majesty would be guilty of such gross immorality so soon after the murder of the King. So incensed was the old man that he lost no time in endeavouring to arouse his followers, and to enter into a conspiracy to have Bothwell assassinated in order that the 'Queen's Majesty might be saved from the fearful indignity this wicked nobleman sought to inflict upon her.'

This conspiracy would have been carried to a successful issue if it had been led by anyone else but Bomcester. But the fanatic was too indiscreet, and he allowed his hatred to betray him into loud and open expressions of disloyalty. The result was that the plot was exposed, and the ever watchful Bothwell sent his myrmidons to seize all the conspirators and summarily execute them. Bomcester at this time would certainly have paid for his rashness with his life, had it not

been for François, who gave him warning the night previous, and helped him to escape from the city in the disguise of a religious mendicant.

Thus had the youth twice saved the life of the old man, who was far from showing any gratitude, however, and did nothing but lament the loss of the few things he was compelled to leave behind in his hurried flight. François accompanied him for a short distance on the road, and when he was about to part from him, the fanatic clutched him by the shoulder, and in the deep sepulchral voice which was peculiar to him when labouring under suppressed excitement, he said :

‘Boy, go not back to yon damned city, for it is accursed of heaven. A terrible doom is impending over it, and amongst its sinful inhabitants there will be woe and bitter lamentation. It is verily the high place of Satan, therefore shun it as thou wouldst a pest-house. Thou art still young, and hast time for repentance. Flee from the wrath. Forswear thy creed and embrace the new faith, by which alone thou canst be saved. Do this, and if thy soul still yearns for the carnal things of the world my daughter shall wife with thee, and I will call thee son.’

‘Sir, seek not to tempt me,’ answered François sorrowfully. ‘Twice have I saved thy life, and if that gives me no claim to your daughter’s hand, then much do I fear me that my love must go unsatisfied, for I shall ever remain loyal to the Queen and staunch to my faith.’

‘Foolish and misguided youth, go thy ways into the darkness which leads to destruction, since thou wilfully refusest to receive the spirit of truth. My daughter is not for such as thee, and never shalt thou behold her face again until thou art regenerated.’

Having thus delivered himself, the strange old man moved away, and his gaunt figure was soon lost in the darkness.

François stood for some moments looking after him, until with a sigh of despair and an expression of disgust at the fanatic’s ingratitude, he retraced his steps to Edinburgh. He felt somehow as if he was impelled thither by some unseen power, and that though he was a mere nameless waif, without influence or friends, he had a solemn duty to perform in endeavouring to serve the Queen by trying to spy out her enemies. It was perhaps a romantic, if not a foolish, notion ;

but it proved that, young though he was, his loyalty and devotion to the Sovereign were true as steel.

The month of May had now come in, bringing with it promise of a rich and bountiful summer. For some weeks the weather had been exceptionally fine, and everywhere there was evidence that in due time there would be rich stores of the fruits of the earth. Nature was cheerful and full of smiles, and seemed to say to man, 'Peace be with you and goodwill, and industry.' But man heeded not her voice, and the distracted kingdom was torn with internal dissensions, with schisms and intrigues, and undermined with plots and counter-plots. Truth, honesty and honour had been transplanted by a lying and deceitful spirit, and all was corruption and vice. From the Protestant pulpits preachers thundered forth the new doctrine and taught forbearance, peace, forgiveness and charity. But their words fell on barren soil and took no root, and even they themselves practised not what they preached, but were stirred to the depths with hatred for those who differed from them.

With a fatuity that seems almost incredible, Mary Queen of Scots allowed her passion for Bothwell to have full rein in spite of the universal reprobation of her people. Bothwell himself was hated and feared, save by his soldiers and retainers, who, probably in admiration of his remarkable courage and audacity, were true and faithful to him. In fact, he managed to inspire amongst them a sort of worship, and to this, no doubt, he owed his life, for had it not been for the fear of the fury his death by assassination would have aroused amongst his followers, the secret dagger or the poisoned cup would most certainly have cut short his career. But fear he knew not; and his mercilessness to those who thwarted or threatened him was his safeguard.

On May 12 the Queen went in State to the High Court of Edinburgh. Amid the waving of banners, the blaring of trumpets, the thunder of cannon, and surrounded by the most imposing pomp, her Majesty rode through the streets amidst the acclamations of her people. She was mounted on a superb black horse, which was covered with an ermine cloth that was trimmed with fringe of scarlet silk. The Queen wore a costly robe of purple velvet, ornamented with ermine and gold. Her splendid hair was interlaced with strings of priceless pearls, and round her throat she wore

a band of rubies and diamonds. In spite of the cares and anxieties that had so long beset her, she looked handsome and every inch a Queen.

In the High Court, the sunlight pouring through the windows lit up a scene of imposing grandeur, for the magistrates and nobility of Scotland were assembled, all gorgeously attired, so that the profusion of colour was marvellous. Men-at-arms, clad in complete armour that was blinding in its brightness, were scattered through the Court, and every entrance was guarded by royal troops, bearing on their breasts the royal standard of Scotland. Announced by two heralds, gorgeously clad in scarlet and gold, and bearing silver trumpets, her Majesty appeared before the assembled multitude, and in a clear, firm voice announced to all present, and through them to all Scotland, that she was free; that she pardoned the Earl of Bothwell the offence he had committed against her, in consideration of his subsequent good conduct, and that she meant to promote him to still higher honour. And there and then she proclaimed him Duke of Orkney and Shetland, and with her own fair hands she placed the richly-jewelled coronet on his head. This being done, and when the blaring of trumpets had ceased, she further informed her people that in order to put an end to her solitary widowhood, and increase the number of her descendants, she intended to contract a marriage with the "mighty and noble lord in three days' time."

This announcement was received in almost solemn silence. Men stared at each other in amazement, and some of them were almost aghast, for they felt that the kingdom was doomed, and that ruin and disaster would certainly follow on such a shameful union. It had long been known and suspected that the Queen desired to wed Bothwell, but it was not believed that she would really go to such a length, and against the wish of all her subjects. It was as yet but three months since the King's death, and now his widow openly announced her marriage with his murderer. Well might that august assembly feel shocked, for its members knew only too well that the insane act of their Sovereign presaged terrible trouble for the country.

Mary herself was not slow to perceive the bad impression she had created, and as she had nothing further to say, she ordered her heralds to announce her return; and then, in

company with Bothwell, she rode back to Holyrood. The news of the announcement she had made in the Court-house had spread from lip to lip with marvellous rapidity ; and those who had acclaimed her as she proceeded to the Court allowed her now to pass by with scarcely a voice being raised. The people had received the intelligence with gloomy silence and sombre disapprobation. One man, however, had the boldness to cry out :

‘ It is a sore matter to see that good Princess run to utter wreck, and nobody to forewarn her. I crave your Grace pause and think of the damage you will do your honour, of the danger you will bring upon your infant son, and the ruin you will cause your country !’

At a sign from Bothwell one of his soldiers felled the speaker to the ground with a brutal blow ; but, notwithstanding this, some market-women, who were collected in a group at a street-corner a little further on, exclaimed as the Queen passed :

‘ God preserve your Grace, if you are sackless (innocent) of the King’s death !’

Her Majesty heard these words, and her face blanched a little. But she took no notice, though she knew that the women only expressed a suspicion that was shared by all her subjects. Still, her passion for her daring lover overcame her better nature, and she resolved to wed him come what might.

CHAPTER L.

HOW THE EARL OF BOTHWELL WAS TRAPPED.

ON May 15, at four o’clock in the morning, at the Palace of Holyrood, the marriage ceremony between Bothwell and Mary Queen of Scots was performed. Not more than half a dozen of the nobility were present, and only a few of the Queen’s personal attendants and of the household. Bothwell had indeed triumphed. He had gained the throne, though he had waded through a sea of blood to reach it. But his triumph was to be short-lived, and his fate was to be a terrible one.

A few hours after his marriage he was alone in his luxurious apartment, when there entered unto him, unbidden and unannounced, Renaud, the Court physician ! The Earl started

with surprise and anger, and was about to demand with his habitual coarseness by what right the visitor dared to intrude upon him, when Renaud, with a smirking smile, knelt on one knee, and in mock humility kissed Bothwell's hand, saying at the same time :

'My Lord Bothwell, I congratulate you on your marriage and accession to power ; and in this moment of your great triumph, I, your most faithful follower, would crave to be remembered !'

'Rise, good Renaud,' responded the Earl with forced gentleness, and feeling strongly tempted to strangle the man, who he knew too well was as dangerous as the most deadly of serpents. 'I told thee once the Earl of Bothwell never forgot his friends and never forgave his enemies. Thou mayst rest assured, therefore, that an thou hast shown me friendship, thy reward shall be commensurate with thy fidelity.'

Renaud was not to be deceived by any such ambiguous phrasing as this ; nor was he disposed to be humble, although he simulated abject humility. But now he rose up haughtily, and with his dark face glowing with the passion which he suppressed, he made answer :

'My lord, if you have risen you have risen on my shoulders, and I must share your greatness !' "

'How now, dog !' cried the Earl, losing his temper. 'Remember thou art addressing the King !'

Renaud smiled contemptuously as he replied :

'An I be a dog, my lord, you shall find that I can bite. But I give you your words back. I am your equal !'

'Have a care !' hissed Bothwell furiously, as he half drew his jewelled dagger and strode threateningly towards his opponent. 'An thou art saucy I may be tempted to plunge my dagger into thy black heart, and cause thy body to be flung as carrion to the curs of the gutter !'

With consummate coolness, and yet with compressed lips and anger-flashing eyes, Renaud stood firm and faced the Earl, and drawing a dagger likewise, much to the other's astonishment, he said :

'Have a care, good my lord, for two can play at daggers. This is your wedding-day, but an you seek to do me injury it may prove to be your death-night. I came prepared for you, as you see !'

Bothwell was certainly taken aback at being thus bearded,

but his habitual courage and audacity did not desert him, and though he was seething with anger he concealed it, and said :

‘Put up thy weapon, man, I was not serious, though thy words angered me.’

‘Listen, my lord,’ replied Renaud, still clutching his dagger firmly, and holding it ready to strike in case Bothwell had shown any disposition to attack him, ‘your fair words cannot deceive me, for well I know that in your heart you bear for me intense hatred. But you have played into my hands, and I should be a fool indeed an I failed to profit by the knowledge I possess. Well do I know that your hireling assassins encompass me, but take heed of what I say : if I fall by violence, that moment of a certainty marks your own swift destruction. I have a powerful following, faithful and staunch to me even as your creatures are faithful and staunch to you. In various hands and in various places I have deposited sealed packets containing minute details of your crime duly attested by witnesses. My death by violence is to be the signal for the opening of those packets, and for their contents to be made public. And it is not more sure that the moon and the stars shine in the heavens than that your doom will be sealed. You will therefore see, my lord, that your safety and your interests demand that you should respect my person and satisfy my desires.’

Bothwell listened to this bold speech in perfect amazement ; but he would have been obtuse and dull indeed had he failed to recognise that he had met his match in Renaud. He felt sure that the statement he had listened to was correct, and that he had in point of fact been outwitted. Used as he had been all his life to commanding, he felt it very hard now to have to obey. But he was conscious that a net, so to speak, had been woven around him, and turn which way he would, there was no outlet of escape. Much as he despised the man before him, he was fain to confess to himself, painful as the confession was, that his enemy was master of the situation.

‘You speak boldly and have played well, Monsieur Renaud,’ said Bothwell, ‘but let me remind you that of your complicity in the crime I have ample evidence, and that a word from me would be sufficient to bring about your arrest and execution !’

The sardonic smile which was peculiar to Renaud when he felt more than usual contempt for anyone wreathed itself about his thin lips now as he made answer :

‘My lord, you do but trifle ; and you show but little shrewd-

ness in your speech. You are aware that public opinion is against you, and everyone believes you to be the assassin of his late Majesty. If you were to denounce me, overwhelming evidence would instantly be produced to drag you down and bring you to the block. Not even your royal wife would have power to save you. Nay, she herself might find it necessary to flee from the wrath of her people. I have taken every means, and neglected no step to ensure your conviction at any moment I like to speak. I have written evidence signed and sealed by your creatures, and as I have already told you, any injury done to me by your orders will be the signal for your downfall.'

Bothwell inwardly writhed as he listened to these words, and he longed to get his fingers round the throat of his enemy and strangle him to death. 'But what shall I gain by that?' he asked mentally. A momentary revenge it was true, but would it not bring utter ruin to himself? Biting his lip to control his feelings, he demanded with suppressed passion:

'What would you with me, Monsieur Renaud? I admit that at present the game is on your side, therefore I cannot dictate terms. But name your price and you shall be paid!'

'I am glad, my lord, that you are getting sensible at last,' Renaud answered with provoking coolness. 'My terms are commensurate with the service I have rendered. Her Majesty must confer an earldom upon me, together with an estate in Scotland of an annual value of at least ten thousand merks. She must appoint me her chief physician for life, and from you I require the immediate payment of twenty thousand merks!'

'The payment of twenty thousand merks I will make to you,' answered Bothwell with a growl, and feeling perfectly amazed at the cold-blooded audacity of his opponent, 'but as for your other demands I have naught to do with them, and you must appeal to her Majesty.'

'No, my lord,' Renaud returned, 'I must not, her Majesty is but your puppet. You have only to order and she will obey. To you I look for my reward, and from you it must come!'

'So be it,' exclaimed Bothwell, scarcely able to contain himself with rage. 'The keeper of my privy purse shall pay you the twenty thousand merks to-morrow. For the other I will use my influence with her Majesty.'

'Your privy purse-keeper will *not* pay me,' said Renaud. 'I

take the money only from your hands. I will have no witness to the transaction. The policy of that course will be at once apparent to your lordship.'

Bothwell almost groaned as he recognised how thoroughly he was in the hands of this adventurer, against whom he was as powerless as he would have been if he had tilted against a solid stone wall.

'It shall be as you desire,' the Earl said in a voice that plainly told how exasperated he was. 'At the hour of ten of the clock be here, and I will pay you the money. For the rest, I will discuss it with her Majesty, and a title and estate shall be conferred upon you at the earliest possible moment. That business being settled, let the interview end, for between you and me there can be no love.'

Renaud smiled again in his cold and provoking manner, and replied with withering irony :

'I am not sure but what your love, my lord, might be more dangerous than your hatred, for, being aware of the latter, I can guard against it. And, moreover, since I desire not your love, nothing is lost. At ten of the clock to-morrow I will be here. Adieu, my lord, may you have joy of your marriage !'

Renaud bowed in feigned humility and withdrew. Then Bothwell gave vent to the passion that he had so long restrained, and his sinister face looked terrible in its expression of hate and wrath.

'Devil !' he hissed, looking towards the doorway where his enemy had disappeared, and in his excitement drawing his dagger and plunging it into the table until half the blade was buried in the wood. 'Devil !' he repeated with greater emphasis, and hissing out the word as though he was spitting venom. 'You triumph for the moment,' he continued, 'but that triumph shall be short-lived. You have trapped me, but, an I find not a way to escape from the trap, then shall the Earl of Bothwell be written down a fool. And doubt not, Monsieur Renaud, that an I *do* escape, my vengeance shall fall upon you with a weight that you little reckon of.'

CHAPTER LI.

INTO CAPTIVITY.

THE Earl of Bothwell had too much keenness of penetration, and too much aptitude for judging men, not to see that it would be dangerous to himself to dally with Renaud. That he had underrated him at first he knew now to his bitter regret; but he could no longer be blind to the fact that he had to deal with a man who was his equal in duplicity and audacity, and his superior in cunning.

‘I must raise him in order that his fall may be the greater,’ Bothwell mused, as he pondered on Renaud’s demands. ‘Time shall bring me revenge, and it shall be the more deadly for the patience I exercise.’

Comforting himself with this reflection, he laid the whole matter before the Queen, and impressed on her the necessity of quieting Renaud by throwing sop’s to him. Taking the same view as her husband, though equally determined to punish Renaud should the opportunity present itself, she determined to create him Earl of Hawksvale, and by which he would acquire the estate and castle of Hawksvale, near Moffat. The former owner of this estate had been found guilty of high treason, but had escaped to England, and his property had been confiscated. Nominally, it was worth more than Renaud had stipulated for, but in reality it was a barren waste, and was the scene of frequent border conflicts. The castle of Hawksvale was simply a border stronghold, and had been built more with a view to defence than luxury, although it was capable of affording a good deal of rough comfort. For some time it had been in charge of one of her Majesty’s stewards, who had kept it in good repair.

In bestowing this property upon Renaud, the Queen believed that she would not be much troubled with him in the future, as his time and attention would be concentrated upon his newly acquired possession, and she observed to Bothwell, with an artful smile:

‘Methinks the new Earl will find Hawksvale Castle a veritable place of hawks; for an I be rightly informed, the English freebooters regard it with envious eyes. But should they succeed in burning it over his head and involving him

in its ruins, I shall have a higher opinion of these lawless English.'

'Your Majesty's remark is suggestive,' her husband replied thoughtfully, as a new idea struck him. 'A night raid by a handful of bold border riders might rid us of a very troublesome personage, and the Earl of Hawksvale, the first and last representative of the earldom, might find a nameless grave near the blackened ruins of his castle, much to our relief. An I know aught of these borderers, and methinks I do, a bag of good Scots pounds will be a wonderful incentive for them to carry the fiery brand to my lord of Hawksvale's residence.'

The significance of these words was not lost upon the Queen; but she said nothing, being content to leave the matter in the hands of the designing Bothwell, who was not likely to hesitate at anything that would safely rid him of his enemy. On the following morning, in accordance with his promise, the Earl of Bothwell paid over to Renaud the sum of twenty thousand merks, and announced to him her Majesty's intention of bestowing an earldom upon him. Renaud heard this with ill-concealed joy, and later, when alone in his chamber, he gave way to the most extravagant manifestations of delight. After years of patient waiting and artful plotting he had gained power and wealth at last—so he thought. And he, the poverty-stricken waif of Paris, was about to become a Scottish earl.

In a few days it was publicly announced that as 'a reward for long and faithful service,' her Majesty's faithful attendant and physician, and naturalized Scotchman, Renaud, would be elevated to the peerage, with the title of the Earl of Hawksvale, and that the confiscated estate of Hawksvale would be bestowed upon him, with its stronghold and all its emoluments.

This announcement did not cause much comment or attract much notice amongst the common people; but the nobles were indignant, as they said that an adventurer was being raised to their level, while a few of the bolder spirits amongst them declared that the earldom and the estate were simply bribes for Renaud to keep silent with reference to certain knowledge he possessed. If Renaud heard any of the opinions that were expressed about him he was not affected thereby; and the Queen and Bothwell were too much occupied with their own pressing affairs to take any heed. In a short time Parliament ratified the new creation, and gave Renaud legal possession of the property. And that done, the new Earl set

off with his creature Bastian to view his estate, and to gather retainers about him to safeguard it.

Amongst those whom he took into his service was a woman named Helen Macdonald, whose devotion he had won by attending her during a dangerous illness. She had occupied a menial position in Holyrood Palace, and had been seized with small-pox. As there was a terrible dread of this disease amongst all classes, she had been turned out of the palace, and as she had no friends who would receive her, she must have perished like a dog had not Renaud installed her in a lonely cottage near Duddingstone, not far from Holyrood. And here, thanks to his care and attention, she slowly recovered, and her gratitude knew no bounds. In fact, she became his slave almost, and being restored to her former position in the palace, she proved useful to him as a spy. She was remarkable for her physical strength, and though a very illiterate woman, she had a great amount of natural intelligence. Renaud had already utilized this creature's services to watch the movements of Adrienne de Bois, and now that he had become the possessor of a castle, and had his own retainers, he determined, with Helen Macdonald's aid, to attempt to carry Adrienne off. Not only was he desirous of obtaining the lady's fortune, but he wanted to be revenged at the same time, for, like all mean men, he was bitter and revengeful, and wished to make poor Adrienne feel his power. He believed that if he could once get her safely locked up in Hawksvale Castle, he could in time overawe her and prevail upon her to marry him. To rid himself of her afterwards would not be a difficult matter, he thought; and if he could only make it appear that he was not connected with her disappearance he would have nothing to fear from the Queen's anger.

Having conceived this cowardly plot, he took the woman Macdonald into his confidence, and by holding out the temptation of a liberal bribe, he had no difficulty in securing her co-operation. But, though it was easy enough to make the plot, it was not so easy to put it into practical shape. It was imperatively necessary that the utmost secrecy should be exercised, in order that suspicion should not fall upon Renaud. For he was sure that the Earl of Bothwell would be only too quick to make it an excuse for depriving him of his newly-acquired title and estates, and imprisoning him. Renaud was perfectly well aware that at present his position was not so

strong nor his power so great that he could set the Queen and her husband at defiance. Therefore, his plot must be carried out expeditiously and with absolute secrecy.

He mentioned his fears and difficulties to Helen, but she laughed at them, and was equal to the occasion. 'Name a time and place where you wish her to be, and I will pledge myself to have her there,' she said.

This was definite at least, and Renaud indicated a date, and named a spot where his creature Bastian and another man would be in waiting to kidnap Adrienne, and bear her off to Hawksvale.

In undertaking to lure the unfortunate Adrienne into the snare that was thus being prepared for her, Helen did not overrate her power. She was aware that Adrienne was in the habit of occasionally visiting an old woman, who had formerly been in service in the palace, but who, becoming partially blind, and too old for further service, had been pensioned off, and installed in a snug cottage about two miles from the palace and on the road to Leith, and here she lived with a widowed daughter and three grandchildren. Helen Macdonald had once conveyed a message from this old lady to Adrienne, and she resolved to take advantage of her knowledge to place Adrienne in Renaud's power. It was therefore arranged that Bastian and his help were to be in waiting with horses on a given evening, between the palace and the old pensioner's cottage. Then Helen Macdonald told Adrienne that a message had just been brought that the old woman had been taken dangerously ill, and had sent an urgent message asking her to go to her.

Adrienne's kindly heart was touched instantly, and making no inquiries about the messenger, for she never dreamed of deception, she started hurriedly off at about four o'clock in the afternoon. Everything was in favour of the successful carrying out of Renaud's dastardly plan. The afternoon was sullen, rain threatened, and the road was lonely. The spot where the kidnappers had concealed themselves was in a small fir plantation on the side of the road, half-way between the palace and the old woman's cottage. Helen had undertaken to accompany Adrienne, and when they reached the plantation Adrienne was suddenly seized by her companion. In a moment Bastian rushed forward with the other man. A huge cloak was thrown over Adrienne, she was lifted on to

a horse, and before she could utter cry or offer resistance, she was being borne rapidly southward. For some time she was bewildered by the suddenness of the attack. Her head, being enveloped in the cloak, she could see nothing, and could hardly breathe, and in a little while she absolutely fainted, and did not recover consciousness for half an hour. The cloak had been removed then, and only a lingering gleam of daylight was in the sky, but it enabled her to see that she was on horseback, and was supported in the powerful arms of Bastian, while another horse bore a second man and Helen Macdonald. The presence of Bastian made it clear to Adrienne at once that she was at last in the power of Renaud.

‘What is the meaning of this outrage?’ she gasped, almost choking with indignation.

‘It means that my master, whom thou hast defied so long, is now in a position to break thy spirit and thy heart at the same time,’ answered Bastian, with a malicious grin on his repulsive face.

Poor Adrienne sickened with a nameless fear; but she knew how useless argument would be with this man, and she therefore wisely resolved to hold her peace.

For three or four hours longer they continued to ride, and then rein was drawn at a lonely house in the occupation of an old man and a woman. Here Adrienne was ordered to dismount, which she was by no means reluctant to do. She entered the house, where some rough refreshment was provided, and Adrienne soon gathered that the old man and woman were hirelings of Renaud’s. She passed the night in a barely-furnished chamber with Helen Macdonald as her custodian. She appealed to this woman for pity, and tried to prevail upon her to allow her to escape, promising her a considerable sum of money if she did so; but Helen was immovable and obdurate, and weary and jaded Adrienne at last fell asleep.

Ere the sun had well risen the following day the journey was resumed, Adrienne riding with Bastian as before, though without the cloak. At first she had offered strenuous protest and refused to mount, but with brutal ferocity Bastian seized her and swore that he would strangle her if she uttered so much as a whimper. And so, perforce, she submitted, nursing a hope that some means of escape might providentially occur.

The night was darkening in as they rode into the lonely

region of Hawksvale. The silent hills were deeply empurpled with shadows, and their outlines were cut clear against the lingering gleams of the glowing west. Ghostly and grim looked the pine forests; and a torrent chanted a hoarse song as it tore its way over its rocky bed. It was a vale in which, at that moment, solitude seemed to have made its home, though often the echoes had been awakened by the clash of arms, and the passionate cries of warlike men, as they stained their steel in each other's blood. Now the horses' footfalls made no sound on the springy turf, and only the torrent's roar broke the silence, which was like the silence of death.

Soon the castle was reached. A water ditch surrounded it, and the drawbridge was up. Helen's companion alighted and blew a blast on a horn that hung on a post. A man appeared at the sallyport and demanded who the intruders were. Bastian answered, and instantly the drawbridge was lowered, and in another moment Adrienne found herself in a court-yard, and beheld with shrinking terror that the Earl of Hawksvale was standing ready to receive her, his sinister face lighted up with a smile of joy as he saw that his triumph so far was complete.

CHAPTER LII.

IN THE SERPENT'S COILS.

ADRIENNE was completely exhausted. The long ride, the want of proper food, and the mental anxiety and shock had prostrated her, and she felt faint and ill and appeared as if about to fall. She was conscious that somebody came to her assistance, and led her forward, down a dimly-lighted stone passage, and then into a well-furnished chamber. The somebody was Helen Macdonald, and as Adrienne sank on to a couch she regarded the woman with disgust and horror, and her first impulse was to indignantly order her away, for she knew that the creature had shamefully deceived her and led her into a trap. But Adrienne checked this impulse, as she remembered that after all the wretched woman was a mere mercenary, and had given her services for money, and instantly it occurred to the poor captive that she might turn this cupidity to account, and by paying Helen liberally induce her to connive at her escape.

'Why hast thou lent thyself to this outrage on my liberty and dignity, Helen?' Adrienne demanded.

'Because I have been well paid for it,' the woman answered curtly, and then, as if wishing to avoid the subject, she said: 'Let me assist you to disrobe, then I will seek food for you. You look white and ill.' This was not unkindly said, and as Adrienne did not deem it prudent to enter into any discussion with Helen, she merely replied:

'Yes, I am ill. Thou shalt get me some refreshment. I would fain have a draught of wine as it is procurable, for I have a consuming thirst.'

'I am a stranger to the house,' answered Helen, 'but may be they are not so barbarous but they have wine for a lady's drinking. The new Lord of Hawksvale will, I doubt not, have a vintner, and I will seek him out.'

Helen left the room, much to Adrienne's relief, for she was only too glad to be alone. Her thoughts were sad enough, and her feelings were harrowed as she remembered Basile and François. She knew how distressed they would be when they heard of her abduction. She shuddered a little as she realized that she was now thoroughly in the power of Renaud, who had thus conveyed her to this remote and lonely part of the kingdom in order that he might be more secure from detection. She did not doubt for a moment that if the Queen knew of her whereabouts she would rescue her, but she reflected with alarm that Renaud was too wily to let his plot leak out; and the artful and secret manner in which she had been carried off caused Adrienne to sicken with despair, since it seemed manifest that those who loved her would remain in entire ignorance of her fate.

Half an hour passed, and Helen Macdonald had not returned. Adrienne had been so absorbed with her reflections, and felt so disinclined to move, that she was still reclining on the couch when unexpectedly and suddenly the tapestry overhanging the door was drawn aside, and Renaud appeared. His sudden intrusion electrified Adrienne into activity, and she sprang to her feet, demanding to know why he had thus intruded himself upon her.

His dark, pale face seemed more than usually sardonic, and his thin lips were curved with a scornful smile.

'I am the Earl of Hawksvale,' he answered, infected with pride and a sense of his own importance. 'This castle is my

possession absolutely, and therefore I cannot intrude upon you, seeing that I am the master here.'

'Thou art a villain!' she ejaculated with fiery indignation.

'Thou art bold, and even insolent, seeing that thou art captive and in my power,' he retorted.

'And what wouldst thou with me?' she demanded. 'Wherefore hast torn me from my friends, and so shamefully betrayed the trust that her Majesty has reposed in thee? Rest assured, sir, that the Queen's Majesty will exact from thee a terrible reckoning.'

'I have her Majesty like that,' Renaud sneered, as he made a sign with his hand, indicating that he had her in his grip.

'Shame on thee for thy disrespect of the good Queen,' cried Adrienne, burning with indignation.

'Disrespect,' Renaud repeated, 'and how am I disrespectful, mademoiselle? Art thou so dull of wit that thou knowest not that Queen Mary put away one husband that she might mate with his murderer, and that murderer shamelessly divorced from his wife?'

Adrienne uttered a shriek, and covered her face with her hands as if she were perfectly horrified at Renaud's disloyal utterance.

'Shame on thee for a knave and a traitor!' she gasped, quite breathless with anger. 'Thy wicked slanders against the dear Queen will recoil upon thine own head; and, if Heaven be just, a speedy retribution will overtake thee. Thy evil-speaking tongue shall yet cry aloud for pity from the royal lady whom thou now vituperatest. Go to; thou art an unworthy traitor, and shouldst be hanged.'

Renaud winced at this, and his anger nearly got the better of him; but after a pause and a struggle with himself, he said:

'Thou givest expression to harsh words that, an other lips uttered, I should know how to resent them.'

'I fear thee not,' cried Adrienne with energy, and seeming to gather strength and resolution. 'And now I demand to know why thou hast dared to tear me from my friends and forcibly bring me here?'

'To marry thee,' he answered, with provoking calmness.

'Marry me!' she exclaimed, with a laugh of scorn. 'Thou hast surely a strange notion of how a lady should be wooed.'

Nay, I vow by my faith in heaven that rather than wed thee I would mate with a toad.'

Renaud was seething with anger, but he made a desperate effort to appear cool and collected.

'Adrienne de Bois, listen to me,' he exclaimed with suppressed energy. 'Years ago I wooed thee in Paris, as men woo the women they love. Thou gavest me hope, ay, even a promise; but the hope was blighted and the promise was broken, and the cause I know now. It was the evil shadow of Basile the Jester that fell between thee and me. Since then I have often sought to win thy heart, but that shadow has never departed. I had Basile in my power, but he has escaped me, though thou shalt not. Revenge is sweet, and it is pleasure to me to know that thou, who hast so long defied me, art at last in my absolute keeping.'

'Thou art a coward!' she hissed passionately, and aroused to desperation as she recognised her danger.

'I am thy master,' he retorted savagely. 'And I will break thy spirit and wound thy pride before I have finished with thee.'

Adrienne shrank away with instinctive fear, as this man now revealed to her what a monster he was. That she was too truly in his power at present she recognised with a sense of awful despair; and yet she had the foresight to see that it were worse than folly to defy him. The fly entangled in the spider's web might struggle desperately, but its efforts only served to exhaust it and render it an easier prey to its captor. And so, with commendable wisdom, Adrienne resolved not to exasperate the man whose captive she was, but to try and conciliate him by diplomacy. She therefore assumed a forced composure, and standing firmly before him, said:

'My Lord of Hawksvale, I have given thee no cause to use such terrible threats towards me. I am a distressed gentlewoman, and thou shouldst be chivalrous enough to display pity rather than harshness to one who has done thee no wrong.'

'Thou hast done me grievous wrong,' he exclaimed with savage emphasis.

'How so, my lord?'

'Thou hast trifled with my heart. Though I hold exalted position, thou hast neglected me for the plebeian gutter-dog, Basile the Jester.'

At this taunt Adrienne fired up. She could not help it, and with bitter scorn she retorted, 'My Lord of Hawksvale'—she

laid particular stress on these words—'My Lord of Hawksvale, I would remind thee that thy power and title are too new, and, like new shoes, fit thee too clumsily for thee to talk about other folk being gutter-dogs. I must ask thee to remember what thou wert a few short years ago, when threadbare and hungry thou camest to her Majesty's palace in Paris. Basile, whom thou revilest, was born in the Court, and has breathed the atmosphere of royalty from his cradle, as his father and grandfather did before him. The blood in his veins is purer than thine own, and thy position thou owest to me.'

The terrible sting of these words tortured the self-inflated Renaud out of all self-command. Like all such men who suddenly rise to power and position, he was arrogant and despotic, and could not bear to be reminded of his humble origin. Moreover, Basile was his rival, and he hated him, and, what is more, feared him, because he knew that he could not disguise from Basile that he was an impostor. And now to hear his rival praised, while he himself was spoken disparagingly of, maddened him. He bore no love for Adrienne, that was certain, but in his stupid pride he could not bear the idea that she gave the preference to the Jester. In his excitement he seized her roughly by the wrists until she almost fainted with terror, and putting his face so close to hers that his hot breath fanned her cheek, he hissed passionately :

'Have a care, woman, an thou hast a desire to live. Basile, the dog, has ever been a stumbling-block in my path. I had him in my grip once, and would have crushed him but he escaped me—thanks to the treachery of François, whom perdition catch. But now I have thee, I swear by the Cross of Christ that rather than let thee and Basile come together again, thy bones shall moulder in the dungeons of this castle. Thou hast set me at defiance long enough, but now my day has come, and if thou art wise thou wilt respect me.'

He flung her off and stood panting with excitement, and glaring at her with rage. Almost paralyzed with fear, Adrienne could speak no word; and the force with which he had pushed her from him had sent her reeling against the couch, on to which she sank, and hiding her face in her hands, she groaned in agony.

Fortunately at this moment Helen Macdonald returned and put an end to the scene. Turning to her, Renaud exclaimed :

'Helen, I have been defied. In thy care I leave Adrienne

de Bois. Bring her to her senses, and mark me,' he added sternly, 'it were better that thou hadst never been born if she should escape.'

He left the room without another word, and Adrienne, stricken with fear and grief, continued to sob and moan, while Helen, evidently a little bewildered at the unexpected position she suddenly found herself in, stood regarding the weeping Adrienne with a puzzled and not altogether unsympathetic expression on her fat face.

CHAPTER LIII

'AMBITION: BY THAT SIN FELL THE ANGELS.'

ADRIENNE'S disappearance was not an event in which the outside public were likely to feel much concern. But in the Court itself there was intense indignation and even alarm. So skilfully had her abduction been arranged, that Renaud was not at first suspected, and, in fact, the cause of her sudden departure was a mystery. The Queen was greatly distressed, and caused inquiries to be made as to the movements of her favourite on the day of her disappearance; but these inquiries elicited nothing beyond the fact that Adrienne was known to have left the palace, though she had not hinted to living soul what her destination was. Lord Bothwell himself, cute and far-seeing as he usually was, did not for a moment suspect Renaud, for he was quite in ignorance that there had ever been any love passages between the two. Within a week of her disappearance Renaud had returned to the Court, and manifested well-feigned surprise when he heard the news, and later when her Majesty sent for him and questioned him as to his opinion, he said:

'Your Grace may rest assured that this ungrateful lady, all unmindful of your Majesty's goodness to her, hath taken herself off to her plebeian lover.'

'A plebeian lover!' exclaimed the Queen in utter amazement.

'Even so, your Majesty.'

'And who is this lover?' demanded the Queen imperiously, and with an indignant toss of her head.

'Even the fool, who erstwhile bored your Grace's royal ears with his dull wit, but who, a traitor to your Majesty's cause,

hath set certain scandals afloat concerning your royal person and that of your most noble and devoted husband.’

‘Dost mean Basile?’ cried the Queen, almost breathless with surprise and indignation.

‘The same, an it please your Grace.’ “

The Queen’s face and neck were dyed scarlet with the burning flush of passionate anger, as, without reflecting for a single moment, she jumped to the conclusion that it was all true. Seldom, indeed, did she display so much passion as she did now, as she thought she had been grossly deceived by Adrienne.

‘My Lord of Hawkswale,’ she cried, ‘you make serious statements, but I doubt not you have proof.’

‘Indeed I have, your Majesty. My eyes have not been shut of late, and I have seen many things, and during your Majesty’s enforced absence from the palace, I discovered Basile and Adrienne de Bois closeted together in the lady’s chamber.’

‘Impossible!’ gasped the Queen.

‘An it please you, your Majesty, it is strictly true.’

‘And why didst thou not slay the caitiff?’ the Queen cried with fiery energy.

‘I placed him under arrest,’ Renaud continued, ‘and having ample proof in my possession that he was in league with the conspirators who had driven your Majesty from your own palace, I was determined to administer summary justice, and make short work of him by hanging him. But my base and ignoble son defeated my purpose. For reasons I wot not of he was in league with Basile, and, as I have since learned, he bribed the sentinel in order to gain access to the Stone Chest where the Jester was confined. I had sent my faithful servitor, Bastian, to try and elicit information from Basile of the conspiracy affecting your Majesty’s happiness, and while he was seated with the prisoner, my son assaulted and beat him into insensibility, and then let the prisoner out. And since then, as your Grace is aware, they have both kept out of your royal reach, and set your Majesty’s commands to return at defiance.’

This plausible story, told with unblushing effrontery, completely deceived the Queen. It seemed to her to be quite in accord with all that had happened. Basile and François’s flight and refusal to return appeared to be positive evidence

in support of the story, and once again her faith in Renaud became strong. She felt that he was a friend to her, and that she had done him a cruel wrong in ever suspecting him of treachery. She extended her white jewelled hand to him, and he knelt and kissed it. She was greatly agitated, and tears were in her eyes, for she conceived herself to be a much wronged woman; and it seemed to her that those upon whom she had lavished favours and kindness had been the most deceptive.

Although stirred by emotional sentiment, she was also exasperated by anger, and she said with an expression of stern resolve in her beautiful but sorrowful face :

‘My Lord of Hawksvale, we are grateful for loyal duty, and we pledge ourselves that if this villainous knave Basile be within the precincts of our kingdom, we will leave nothing undone to bring him to justice, and as we live he shall have a short shrift. As for your unworthy son, we cannot do better than leave you to deal with him. By his own confession he was dishonest to us, by daring to look with admiring eyes on the pretty daughter of our bitter and designing enemy, Bomcester. We see now with bitterness how shamefully we have been deceived; but retribution shall fall with a heavy hand on those who have so abused our confidence.’

‘François is my son, your Majesty,’ answered Renaud, his dark, marble-like face showing no sign of his lying and guilty heart; ‘but I blush with shame in having to own to it, and out of my loyal and loving duty to your Grace I place his fate unreservedly in your hands. An it please your Majesty to order him for instant execution, should he be captured, I, his father, out of a strict sense of honour and justice, will not hesitate to see the sentence carried out.’

‘We thank you, my lord,’ said the Queen, scarcely able to control her agitation. ‘Your loyal duty to us has already received recognition at our hands, and rest assured your further devotion shall not pass unnoticed.’

She made a sign with her hand that the interview had ended. She was quite overcome, and as Renaud withdrew she called her maids to her, and ordered them to conduct her to her chamber.

Whatever her faults as a Queen and a woman were, she was staunch to those who served her faithfully, and she had a high regard for friendship, while ingratitude cut her to the quick. It was the thought that Basile, Adrienne and François had

been guilty of the very basest of ingratitude that caused her to feel so keenly now. Although two of them at least were only humble personages in her Court, she had taken a deep interest in them, for it was characteristic of her that no one in her service was too lowly for her gracious notice, and in the case of François she felt so attached to him that she would have raised him to high position. But now he, like the rest upon whom she had lavished kindnesses, had forsaken her.

As Renaud left her Majesty's presence he was unusually elated, and he rubbed his hands together after the fashion of a man who is conscious of having scored a great triumph. It seemed to him that all his plans were prospering, and his most cherished hopes were being realized. But his appetite grew by what it fed upon; and, puffed up with a sense of his own importance, he thirsted for still greater power.

‘My path is straight,’ he mused, ‘and all the difficulties I have smoothed away. But I must go still higher, upward and upward to greatness. I would be a ruler of men, and a prince among princes. I have climbed already to a giddy height, and when I look down and behold the Paris kennel in which I so long grovelled, my head swims; but there is a greater height, a greater greatness still to be attained, and I will win it.’

As these thoughts passed through his brain he had unconsciously wandered along the corridor that led to the Queen's private chapel, and it so happened that as he neared the door of the chapel the choristers were practising the sublime ‘Magnificat,’ and these words, in solemn rhythmical cadence, broke upon his ear:

‘Deposuit potentes de sede, et exaltavit humiles.’*

Renaud started, and a strange fear crept over him and caused his flesh to go cold. Even as he stood the beautiful words were repeated in refrain, and then the chant died away, leaving an awfully impressive stillness. It seemed to him as if they had been specially pointed at him, and sharing as he did all the superstitious feeling of the times, they had a special significance as they mingled with his dream of greatness. Although professedly a good Catholic, he was utterly irreligious, but his conscience smote him now; for it seemed

* ‘He hath put down the mighty from their seat, and hath exalted them of low degree.’

as if a voice from heaven had spoken to him ; and by a sudden impulse he crossed himself, then knelt down and uttered an Ave. Then suddenly, with the intense egotism of a miserable conceit, he applied the words in his own favour, and repeating the last half of the refrain : ‘ And hath exalted them of low degree,’ he said to himself, ‘ I was of low degree and have been exalted.’ This strange perversion of the line to suit his own circumstances quite restored his composure, and muttering another Ave, he rose and turned to go, when he found himself face to face with the Earl of Bothwell. With the humility which he always assumed in Bothwell’s presence, Renaud bowed low.

‘ The noble Earl of Hawksvale seems unusually devout,’ said Bothwell, with cutting irony. ‘ By my soul, I have not seen so rare a sight this many a day. Crossing the corridor to my apartment, I beheld your lordship kneeling in the act of prayer on the bare stones, and I lingered to gaze upon so unique a spectacle. Has thy conscience fretted thee more than usual, most potent Earl of Hawksvale ?’

Renaud flinched under this most scathing fire of sarcasm, and his brow contracted with a deep frown as he made answer :

‘ My Lord Bothwell makes light of a solemn subject. My conscience, my lord, is in my own keeping, and thou, thank heaven, art not my confessor.’

With a low bow he swept past his somewhat disconcerted rival, who stood looking after him and biting his lip with anger. Then Bothwell smiled dangerously, as was his wont, when he uttered a menace, and instinctively clutching the jewelled handle of his rapier, he muttered between his clenched teeth :

‘ The devil seize thee for a traitorous knave. An my wits fail me not, I will still the beating of thy black heart ere thou hast grown much older. Such weeds as thou art should be early cut down, lest they scatter their seeds.’

CHAPTER LIV.

FRANÇOIS TAKES A ‘BOLD’ STEP.

ALTHOUGH Adrienne de Bois’s mysterious disappearance was not a subject upon which the general public concerned themselves, inasmuch as she was not a conspicuous person, nor

known beyond her circle of acquaintances, some little wonder was expressed that a lady of the Court should be able to go away and leave no trace behind. There was one person, however, who heard the news, as it was retailed by tavern and other gossips, with alarm and burning indignation, and that one was François.

Without any very definite object he had remained in Edinburgh, buoyed up by two hopes, as it were. The one that he might wed Lilian, the other that he could obtain the Queen's permission for the union. He was perfectly conscious that the two things were incompatible. Firstly, because the fanatical Bomcester was so incensed against the Queen and Catholicism, that he would never sanction the marriage so long as François showed an attachment to the Court, and refused to become a renegade. Secondly, because her Majesty was not at all likely to countenance one of her servants wedding with the daughter of a man who was not only a sworn enemy to the Catholic Church, but a dangerous and uncompromising plotter against the throne. The youth saw clearly enough, therefore, that he could not have Lilian and serve the Queen. At the same time, while he could not bring himself to resolve to abandon all hopes of Lilian, he would not, on the other hand, prove false to his Church or his Queen. And so he continued to cherish the romantic idea that some day chance would enable him to render a striking service to her Majesty, so that in return he might claim from her a recognition of his union. How this service was likely to be rendered by one so humble and unknown as he, he could not even imagine. But he had faith in his star, and on that faith he lived. So far as Bomcester himself was concerned, he had already rendered him important service, seeing that he had saved his life; but the fanatic was as immovable as a rock, and gratitude he knew not; but the youth believed that if Lilian were a free agent she would readily consent to become his wife, and she might at any date become a free agent by her father's death. And as Bomcester was well advanced in years, to say nothing of his being liable to be arrested at any moment and summarily executed as a danger to the peace of the State, this contingency was by no means a remote one. To return to the palace in obedience to the Queen's commands was, as François knew only too well, to run into danger, and even to jeopardize his life, since Renaud

would not hesitate to have him effectually removed if he found him in any way a menace to him. And knowing as he did now that Renaud was not his father, but was a rank impostor, the youth could not have remained in Court and have been indifferent and silent. To have kept up the deception in regard to Renaud being his father would have been impossible for him to do ; and, therefore, Renaud would of a necessity have felt that his position was threatened, and when he had so much at stake he would not have hesitated to have the danger secretly removed. But quite apart from his own feelings—that is, the intense feeling of disgust and contempt he experienced for Renaud, knowing as he did that he was a knave—François had made a solemn promise to Basile that he would not go back until he was in a position to unmask Renaud and bring him to justice. Although François himself did not know how he was going to gain that position, Basile expressed himself very confident that he would do so, but he was provokingly reticent as to the basis of his definite opinion. Nevertheless, the youth was content to put his trust in his friend the Jester, and filled with high and chivalrous notions, albeit romantic ones, he allied himself with the secret league already mentioned, and he considered that his own special mission was to remain in the capital, watching with ceaseless vigilance for an opportunity to render service to her Majesty and disconcert her enemies.

When it was publicly announced that Renaud had been created an earl, and had been given an estate and a border castle by special act of the Queen, François's heart grew heavy, for he knew too well what this meant. It meant that Renaud had acquired more power, and that his position and character had in consequence become less assailable. Rumour with her thousand tongues had associated Renaud with Bothwell in the murder of the King, and François for one most firmly believed Renaud guilty, and while he would not for a single instant entertain the opinion shared by many, that her Majesty herself had connived at the King's assassination, he did not hesitate to ally himself to the powerful party which denounced Bothwell as the concealer of the plot and the actual murderer. And so the lad reasoned with himself thus :

‘ Renaud is the Earl Bothwell's accomplice ; and his reward for his share in the crime is an earldom and estate. Renaud,

therefore, has the Queen's husband at his back, and how can I in my lowly sphere hope to prevail against a man so powerfully supported ?'

This reflection caused poor François much poignant grief, and he even sank into despair. But when he heard that his foster-mother, whom he loved with all the fervency of a true son, had disappeared, he rose out of this despair like a young giant, and he said to himself :

'Adrienne is in the power of Renaud. My time has come and I must act.'

To say this was easy ; to put it into execution difficult. He came to the conclusion by a process of instinctive reasoning that Renaud had taken Adrienne to his newly-acquired castle on the border ; but the youth saw plainly enough that unless he could raise a little army of trained fighting men to attack the castle, he was all but powerless. To go to the Queen, to throw himself at her feet, to impeach Renaud of treason and treachery, and claim her protection and assistance seemed to him the only course open to him in which there was a fair promise of success. Therefore, without awaiting to consult any of his friends, but despatching a letter to Basile giving him the particulars, he rushed off with the impetuosity of youth to try and see the Queen.

He had attired himself in the dress he usually wore when at the palace. It consisted of lavender hose, and a puce tunic slashed with white satin, and fastened at the waist with a broad velvet belt trimmed with pearls. His brown curly hair was brushed back, and a jaunty little cap, in colour the same as his tunic, was set daintily on his head. No costume could have set off his shapely figure to more advantage, and he looked singularly attractive and handsome. The Queen at this time was not in Edinburgh, but had gone with her Court, no doubt from motives of prudence, to Borthwick Castle, a seat of the Laird of Crookstons, and situated about ten miles from the capital. François, therefore, procured a horse from his friend Geoffrey, the tapster, in the market-place, and rode out to Borthwick. The castle was jealously guarded, for the Queen had strong reason to fear her enemies. The men-at-arms at the entrance gate refused to admit him, although they knew him, and as he appeared excited and refused to tell his errand, they confined him for a time in the guard-room, until by his appeals he prevailed upon the

captain of the guard to convey a message to her Majesty, craving her to grant him an interview, as he had an important communication to make.

The Queen received the message with some surprise, not unmingled with indignation, for she had felt very angry that François had disobeyed her commands to return before, to say nothing of the part which, according to Renaud, he had played in Basile's disappearance. But thinking that now he might have come to caution her against some conspiracy, for she still believed that at heart he was loyal, she gave orders that he was to be admitted to her presence. But wishing, at the same time, to teach him a lesson and administer a rebuke, she added that if he bore any weapon he was to be deprived of it, and was to be conducted into her presence as a prisoner, between two men-at-arms.

François heard this order with surprise and even alarm. But he had no alternative but to comply, and so, delivering up his dagger, the only weapon he carried, he proceeded between the two soldiers to the reception-room.

Her Majesty was seated in a large straight-backed chair of carved oak with arms representing lions. Near her stood Bothwell, and she was surrounded by her maîls and personal attendants, while on each side of the room a dozen hack-buffers stood, wearing helmets and steel corslets.

François was bewildered, and scarcely noted anything or anybody but the Queen herself, who frowned severely, and received him with an austerity that was somewhat unusual with her. François knelt down before her, and waited for her to speak. She allowed some moments to elapse before she did so. Then :

'We have given thee audience, boy, since thou hast stated that thou hast important information to convey to us. But we are angered with thee, for thou art an ingrate, and since thou hast chosen to return at last, we shall hold thee prisoner for a while until we have marked our displeasure of thy conduct.'

François's heart sank, for the Queen's tone and manner gave him little hope that his mission would succeed. He raised his eyes to her face, which was darkened with anger, and seemed clouded with care and anxiety; then he glanced hastily round to see if Renaud was present, and he was somewhat relieved to find he was not; then, lowering his eyes

once more to the floor, he said in sad and submissive tones :

‘Alas, your Majesty ! I am filled with woe that I have incurred your anger, but I would crave your Majesty to believe that I am not an ingrate.’

‘Well, well,’ exclaimed the Queen a little impatiently, ‘we will hear later what justification thou hast to make for thy conduct. But to thy purpose now. What errand has given thee the boldness to brave our wrath and seek an interview with us ? We know how to reward services ; and if thou hast brought us information of value, we may be disposed to deal leniently with thee.’

‘An it please you, your Grace, it is a personal matter, and I have come to humbly crave your Majesty’s aid.’

‘Thou hast boldness, by my faith,’ said the Queen somewhat haughtily, and failing to guess his errand.

‘Ay, your Majesty, an it so please you,’ exclaimed François, gaining courage, ‘since I come on behalf of your Majesty’s faithful servant, and my foster-mother, Adrienne de Bois.’

‘Ah, by the Mass ! now, then, do we understand thy boldness, and can pardon it.’

‘I have heard, your Majesty, that Mademoiselle Adrienne has been carried off.’

‘Where hast thou so heard ?’ exclaimed the Queen, peering into his face.

‘It is so rumoured.’

‘Rumour hath the better of us, then,’ said her Majesty, ‘since we know it not. Thy foster-mother hath disappeared, it is true, but no evidence has been given us that she was forcibly taken away, though, perhaps, thou hast secret knowledge of that.’

‘In truth, it is so,’ cried François, impetuously and illogically.

‘Hast thou proof of thy statement ?’ the Queen asked quickly.

‘I have no such proof yet, your Majesty, but right well do I know that it must be so. Nay, your Majesty ; an you will but consider how truly my foster-mother loved you, and how truthful and faithful she was, your Majesty will feel that nothing on earth could have caused her to desert you save force.’

The Queen looked surprised, even amazed and bewildered,

and turned to her husband inquiringly ; but before he could make any remark, she asked of François :

‘ By Heaven, boy ! thy words cause us to suspect treachery ! Hast thou suspicion of anyone who could have done this deed ? ’

‘ An it so please you I have, your Majesty. ’

‘ Speak out then, and say to whom thy suspicion points. But have a care, lest thou impeach wrongously. Who is’t upon whom thy suspicions fall ? ’

‘ On him whom your Majesty has hitherto believed to be faithful—your Majesty’s chief physician, Renaud. ’

CHAPTER IV.

IN THE GRIP OF HIS FOE.

This accusation fell on all present, the Queen included, like a thunderbolt, and for some moments there was the silence of intense astonishment. Then her Majesty spoke. She was flushed and evidently excited.

‘ Have a care, boy, and remember it is against thine own father thou bringest this grave charge. Hast proof of what thou sayest ? ’

‘ No, your Majesty ; but—— ’

‘ Thou hast no proof,’ cried the Queen, fairly trembling with passion—‘ thou hast no proof, and yet thou hast dared to impeach thine own sire ! ’

‘ He is not my sire, your Majesty,’ François made answer, feeling very uncomfortable, and wondering why her Majesty should be so enraged.

‘ By my sainted ancestors, but this is audacity, and seemeth like madness ! ’ the Queen exclaimed wrathfully. Then she turned to her husband and said something to him, and he issued an order to a gentleman-in-waiting, who immediately retired.

During the above conversation Bothwell had remained silent, but by no means uninterested. He firmly believed now that Renaud was the abductor of Adrienne, but he was puzzled to understand what François meant by saying that Renaud was not his sire.

The Queen herself was irritated against François for not

having returned when she had first commanded him to do so; and knowing, as she undoubtedly did, that Renaud had it in his power to render himself very dangerous to her and Bothwell, she was afraid of offending him.

'We have sent for thy father, boy,' she said sternly, and much to François's discomfiture. 'We will hear his version of the story in thy presence, and we will judge thee according to thy answers.'

François would have made some reply, but was prevented doing so by the entrance of Renaud himself. Renaud had not been informed by the messenger that François was present, and his surprise, therefore, on beholding him was exceedingly great.

'My Lord of Hawksvale,' said the Queen, 'we have sent for thee that thou mayest refute a certain grave charge brought against thee by thy son—to wit, that thou hast carried off our friend and his foster-mother, Adrienne de Bois.'

Renaud turned deadly pale, and the unexpectedness of this accusation did, for the moment, deprive him of his presence of mind, and his consequent confusion did not escape the keen eyes of his enemy, Bothwell. But Renaud had studied deception and self-control too long to be lost in an emergency of this kind. And scarcely deigning to look at the still kneeling François, he replied in cold and unembarrassed tones:

'I trust, your Grace, that, during the years I have been in your Majesty's service, I have given such ample evidence of my devotion to your Majesty that you will not for a moment suspect me of conduct so base. But with your Majesty's gracious leave, I would ask my unworthy son what grounds he has for his accusation?'

Then up spoke François bravely:

'Knowing thy deceptive nature and the persecution to which thou hast subjected Maderpoiselle Adrienne, I can have no doubt that her disappearance is due to thee.'

This answer called forth laughter from the Queen, and an ironical and contemptuous sneer from Renaud, who retorted:

'Knowing the wickedness of thy heart, I was prepared for ingratitude; but I am surprised that thou shouldst have the audacity to present thyself before the Queen's Majesty, and bring such a heavy charge against me without proof of thy statements.'

Renaud spoke with seeming indignation and self-possession, but he was ill at ease nevertheless, and he knew that the only way to protect himself was by unblushing effrontery, and by giving the lie point-blank to François's charge.

'Boy, what hast thou to say now?' the Queen demanded sternly.

François was exceedingly downcast, and saw now that he had made a ridiculous error in coming to the Court without one atom of evidence to support his charge.

'Nothing; as it please you, your Majesty, save what I have already said,' he answered dejectedly.

'Then dost thou deserve a whipping,' answered the Queen, 'and thy father will do well to administer it to thee.'

François fired up a little at this, and exclaimed:

'Your Majesty, Monsieur Renaud is no father of mine.'

Renaud visibly started, but he answered quickly:

'Methinks, your Majesty, that since the unfortunate boy took to associating with traitors to your Majesty his wits have left him.'

Forgetting himself for the moment and that he was in the presence of the Queen, François rose up strong in his indignation, and with clenched fists and knit brows he cried out angrily:

'I am no traitor, sir, nor do I consort with traitors. 'Tis thou who art the traitor.'

'Peace, rude boy!' exclaimed the Queen with great warmth. 'This unseemly conduct becometh thee not in our presence; an thou keepeth not a civil tongue in thy head, we will find means to give thee lessons in good behaviour.'

François stood before the Queen abashed and with bowed head. He was burning with indignation, and wrath against Renaud made it difficult for him to restrain his feelings from finding vent in a passionate outburst of anger. But he had the good sense to see that any display of stubbornness on his part would only lead him into further trouble, for it was very obvious her Majesty was highly offended with him, and was in no mood to be trifled with. She was really offended, not because he had appeared now to lay a charge against Renaud, but because he had refused to obey her commands and return to the Court. She could not brook disobedience, and her sense of dignity was always sorely wounded when her commands were not immediately complied with.

With the quickness of observation which rarely failed him, Renaud saw his opportunity now to get François, whom he really feared, into his power; and so, assuming a tone of sorrow rather than anger, he said :

‘Fain would I spare the rash boy, your Majesty, but my duty to you is, as it has ever been, my first consideration. What may be the true motive of his returning to the Court now, I know not, but doubtless he has been moved to it by some of his wicked associates. For, in spite of your Majesty’s expressed wishes, he has never ceased to strive after Lilian Bomcester, and he is now the tool of her fanatical father, who, as your Majesty is aware, is your deadly enemy.’

The Queen seemed roused to almost ungovernable passion as this was said, and with startling energy she cried :

‘If, as thy father says, thou art the tool of the arch-rebel Bomcester, by Heaven, thy life is not safe from our just anger! Speak; what hast thou to say in thy defence?’

François drew himself up proudly as he answered :

‘What Monsieur Renaud says is knowingly false, your Majesty.’

‘Hast thou the audacity to deny that thou lovest Bomcester’s daughter?’ said Renaud quickly.

‘No, I deny not that.’

‘I crave your Majesty to note his confession,’ cried Renaud, seeing that he had scored a point.

‘But I do deny,’ François went on, ‘that I am the tool of Lilian’s father.’

‘And yet thou wert present at his house when the vile plot was hatched for the slaying of her Majesty’s most faithful friend and servant, David Rizzio,’ Renaud said.

François turned deadly pale as he saw that he was trapped. He stood mute and with downcast eyes before the angered Queen, who exclaimed, almost fiercely :

‘Is this thing thy sire accuses thee of true or not? If thou set store upon thy honour or value upon thy life, contradict it.’

‘He cannot,’ exclaimed Renaud, with some show of excitement.

‘Speak, boy,’ cried the Queen, ‘or has Heaven stricken thee mute, for thy wickedness?’

‘It is true I was in the house,’ François faltered, ‘but I knew not of the conspiracy when I went.’

'A sorry tale,' the Queen said, with a sneer. 'Strange, indeed, it is that I should have been so deceived in thee. I took thee for innocence itself, but now I see thou art a viper, and hath stung the hand that hath nourished thee.'

Carried away by his feelings, François threw himself at the Queen's feet, and in passionate appeal said :

'Oh, your Majesty, think not so ill of me, for by the light of heaven and the glory of the stars, I am no traitor, but am, as I have ever been, your Grace's humble and devoted servitor.'

'And yet thou couldst ally thyself with fiendish knaves who murdered our loyal and beloved servant.'

'Give me leave, I crave you, your Majesty, to speak in my own behalf.'

'Say on, then,' she said sternly ; 'but an thou hast no better explanation than that thou hast already given, it were better far that thou shouldst keep thy speech, lest thy tongue put a noose about thy neck.'

'It is true, your Majesty, that I seem guilty,' said François in broken accents, 'but my greatest guilt is that I have loved Lilian.'

'And if that were all, we might forgive thee,' the Queen remarked in softened tones, 'for thou art young, and Lilian is a comely wench, though she be but a daughter of Satan.'

Renaud, half fearing from this that his plans might be defeated, and that François might gain the Queen's favour again, cried out sharply :

'Let not his smooth face and oily tongue deceive you, your Majesty, for, though he is my flesh and blood, I denounce him as a traitor, for he it was who gave access to the conspirators to your Majesty's cabinet when David Rizzio was murdered.'

'How say you now, boy?' cried the Queen, half starting forward, while her face was crimson with rage.

'Alas, madame, it is too true !' François moaned, as he sank to the ground overwhelmed with shame and confusion.

This confession caused general amazement, but Renaud stood as immovable as a statue, though his pale, cruel face showed the joy his heart felt. In a few moments François seemed to recover himself, for the desperate situation in which he was placed inspired him with the energy of despair. He sprang up, and stretching forth his hands supplicatingly to the Queen, he cried in piteous accents :

‘Oh, your Majesty, forgive me; for, save in this one thing, I have been true to you! And even into that I was drawn against my will. My love for Bomcester’s daughter hath blinded me, and I think I have been mad.’

‘Ay, mad, indeed!’ the Queen replied in a tone of sorrow.

‘But I will be so no longer,’ François pursued. ‘Give me but a chance to show my devotion to your Majesty, and my one error shall be atoned for by lifelong fidelity. But I pray your Majesty to spare me from Monsieur Renaud. He is not my sire, but my bitterest enemy.’

‘He hath confessed himself to be mad, and now he gives evidence of it,’ said Renaud caustically.

‘What dost thou mean by saying thou art not the Earl of Hawksvale’s son?’ the Queen asked.

‘There is no relationship between us, your Majesty,’ answered François, ‘but for purposes of his own Monsieur Renaud hath claimed me.’

‘Who is thy father, then?’ sternly demanded the Queen.

‘Alas! I know not.’

‘Hast thou proof then of what thou statest in reference to my Lord of Hawksvale?’

‘Alas, your Majesty, I have not!’ moaned the unhappy boy.

‘A sorry tale, forsooth,’ said the Queen, with a little laugh of scorn, ‘and it only serves to prove thy baseness. We fain would let thy youth count something in thy favour; but nevertheless thy wickedness cannot be allowed to pass unnoticed, and we will consider what thy punishment shall be.’

This was Renaud’s opportunity, and, moving forward a pace or two, he dropped on one knee, and said:

‘Your Majesty, in denouncing my own son I have done no more than my duty as your Majesty’s devoted and faithful servant. But now I crave your Grace to let me supplicate on his behalf. It were better for him that he were removed from temptation’s way, and with your Grace’s leave I will take him to Hawksvale, and endeavour to turn him into a loyal subject and a dutiful son.’

François’s heart went cold as he heard this, for its meaning to him was only too apparent; and he knew that Renaud, regarding him as a danger to himself, would with diabolical treachery hesitate not to kill him if once he got him into his power and away from the palace. Unable, therefore, to control himself, he exclaimed:

'Your Grace, I do protest——'

'Peace, knave!' cried the Queen in a commanding tone. 'Protests come ill from such as thou. Be dumb, an thou hast aught of shame left in thee. Captain of the guard, make this youth thy prisoner, and hold him at the peril of thy life subject to our disposal. My Lord of Hawksvale, arise. We will confer anon with thee.'

Two men-at-arms stepped forward in obedience to their captain's order, and laid their hands on François's shoulder. He was truly dumb now; for he was stunned and overwhelmed, and the room seemed to swim about his head. He had but a vague and dreamy notion of being led away, and thrust into a cell, where he gave himself up to utter despair.

CHAPTER LVI.

AN AWFUL JOURNEY.

FOR three days François continued a prisoner, knowing nothing and seeing no one save a soldier who twice a day brought him food. The suspense and uncertainty were maddening, but what could he do? He had brought the trouble upon himself; and he saw now, when too late, the fatal error he had committed in coming to the palace to lay a charge against Renaud without one atom of evidence to support it. He knew perfectly well that having at last fallen into Renaud's web, he was not likely to get free again, except by some chance little short of a miracle; for though he had been such a favourite with the Queen he felt that he had offended her beyond hope of forgiveness, and he could not even comfort himself with the reflection that though he had offended his Queen, he had gained Lilian for his wife. In fact, it was highly probable that he would never so much as behold her again; and then, to crown his misery, his foster-mother had been carried away, and, for aught he knew, was in deadly peril.

As these things all presented themselves to him, his heart felt twisted and tortured, and he was numbed by a chilling sense of blank despair; for if the Queen refused to concern herself as to his fate, there was no one else who would, save Basile. But, then, what could Basile do? He was powerless against the formidable cabal which existed about the

Queen. In supposing that her Majesty was utterly indifferent to his fate, however, François misjudged her; the fact was, she was far too harassed and absorbed with her own pressing affairs to give much personal attention to him. She heard the mutterings of the rising storm that her subjects were brewing, and she could no longer be indifferent to the clamourings of her offended people. The murder of the King and her marriage with his murderer had caused indignation from one end of the kingdom to the other, and it was with pained anxiety and strained nerves that she looked towards the future. It seemed dark enough in all truth. Not a gleam shone to give her hope. If she could have stifled public opinion all might have been well; but it was impossible to do that. Treason was rife, and her enemies were leagued together to cause her downfall. Under these circumstances it was little wonder that she did not give any serious consideration to François's case. And when the day after the lad's arrest Renaud went to her and suggested that he should be allowed to deal with him, she felt relieved, and was glad to be rid of an annoyance.

'We give him into thy charge, my lord,' she said, 'for thou, as his father, art his natural guardian; and though thou hast not hesitated to give us information concerning his deception, thy natural affection will prompt thee to stop short of severity. Nay, my lord, it is my personal wish that the boy shall be well cared for. I have strong regard for him and can take no serious view of his youthful follies. I need staunch friends, and he will make one, I doubt not. Therefore guard him well and tenderly.'

It was unfortunate for François that the Queen had thus, all unwittingly, completely played into the hands of Renaud, who fairly chuckled to himself as he thought: 'While the lad lives he will ever be a menace to me. Basile has evidently told him too much, and I must remove him.'

By removing him Renaud did not mean to take his life at once. That would have been to jeopardize himself, and he was too wily to walk into a noose with his eyes open. But his ingenious brain at once conceived a plan which would avert suspicion from himself, and yet effectually silence the lad.

On the third night of his imprisonment François had sunk down on his hard pallet almost maddened with suspense. He

was like a rat in a trap, and could do nothing but beat himself to death against his bars. And all this time his dear foster-mother might be in deadly peril, or suffering persecution worse than death, yet he could not raise a hand to aid her. Oh, how he cursed his folly now, and was half tempted to dash his head against the stone wall in very disgust and vexation with himself. But suddenly he started as he heard the key grate in the lock of his prison door. Then the door opened, and four men armed, one of them carrying a torch, entered. François started to his feet, for his first thought was that they had come to murder him.

‘What wouldst thou with me?’ he cried before either of them spoke.

Then one whom he instantly recognised as Bastian answered: ‘We have orders to remove thee; come!’

François’s heart almost leapt into his mouth, for those words coming from the lips of that man sounded to him like a knell of doom. He knew that Bastian was his enemy, for had he not stricken him to the earth on the night that he succeeded in releasing Basile? But even in this dreadful moment his courage did not desert him, and he glanced round to see if there was anything he could use as a weapon. But there was nothing—absolutely nothing. So he placed his back against the wall, and said:

‘By whose orders hast thou come?’

‘Thou wilt know anon,’ Bastian made reply.

‘I will know now, ere I go with thee a step,’ cried François excitedly.

‘Oh, oh! that is a big squeak for so small a mouse!’ laughed Bastian, advancing a step or two. Then, with his habitual coarseness, he added: ‘Come; I have no time to waste in parleying with thee.’

‘Where dost thou intend to take me?’ François gasped, growing cold with despair, and wondering whether it would not be better to fly at these men and let them hack him to pieces with their weapons rather than endure suspense and uncertainty any longer.

‘I am not here to answer thy questions,’ growled Bastian. Then he added savagely: ‘Come, or the devil seize me if I don’t smite thee on the jaw!’

‘I’ll not go with thee,’ exclaimed François firmly, ‘unless thou hast her Majesty’s orders for my removal.’

Without another word Bastian threw himself upon him and said something to his companions. In an instant the poor lad was enveloped in a sack or cloak and bound tightly with ropes. Then he was lifted up and carried away, and presently he was placed on a horse, his legs being freed for the purpose. A man sat behind him, and he knew that two other horsemen accompanied, one on each side. They rode along for about an hour, then stopped, and he was lifted off the horse and freed from the sack and rope ; but his arms were secured to his side by a cord passed round his waist.

The night was inky black. Not a star glimmered in the sky, and a cold wind swept dismally by. François, who had been half suffocated by the sack, was dazed and stupefied. He was bruised and sore, too, with the rough handling he had received. He had no idea who his companions were, nor where he was being taken to. The lethargy of stupor seemed to come upon him, and he could offer no resistance nor ask any question. In a dreamy way he was conscious of being lifted on the horse again ; of being gripped firmly by strong arms, and of then tearing along with the wind blowing coldly in his face.

There followed then a period of semi-unconsciousness. Worn out with suspense, anxiety, and want of sleep, the poor youth fell into a feverish slumber, being supported all the time by the man behind, who was no other than the creature Bastian.

Throughout the long, dark night the ride was continued, until the morning had well advanced. Then a rest was made at a hostel and horses were changed. François partook of some refreshment, and felt better. Some little time before coming to the hostel he had been relieved of the cord ; but Bastian, with brutal ferocity, had sworn an oath that if he spoke to anyone or attempted to escape he would be cut down. Bastian's companions were two well-armed, powerful, and rough-looking men of martial bearing. They were, in fact, retainers of Renaud, and had spent the greater part of their lives in border warfare. The warning given by Bastian was wholly unnecessary, for François recognised only too surely how utterly useless it would be to attempt to escape. The country they were in was wild forest-land, and there was not even a remote chance of obtaining assistance. He therefore very wisely resigned himself to the inevitable, and determined

to wait for a more fitting opportunity. He guessed now, and guessed rightly, that he was being taken to Renaud's newly-acquired castle. He knew nothing about it beyond that it was somewhere near the border; but he had no doubt in his own mind that he was being taken there for some sinister purpose. And if he had wanted any confirmation of this, he surely would have had it in the ferocious reply Bastian made to a question he ventured to put as to why he was being taken southwards.

'Thou art being taken that I may have the pleasure of strangling thee!' the human brute hissed into the youth's ear as they sped along, after leaving the hostel. 'Thou brokest my pate once, and now I am going to wring thy neck as a market harridan wrings the neck of a hen. Thou art spawn, and I hate thee.'

For this statement Bastian had no warrant, inasmuch as his orders had been simply to convey François to Hawksvale and to guard him close. But the creature knew perfectly well that Renaud, his master, had ulterior and sinister designs with reference to the disposal of the lad.

The savage rejoinder caused François's blood to boil with indignation, and for a moment he was half tempted to turn and smite the brute with all his strength in the face. But, fortunately, he checked himself, and kept his wrath under control; but he did not venture on any further questions, nor, in fact, on speech of any kind; and for hours they rode along in silence. The captive's brain, however, was in a whirl with many conflicting thoughts and plans for his escape, all of which, however, seemed to hold out no hope to him. The weather was wretched, and had been so all day. A drizzling rain had been falling since daylight, and the forests were damp, dripping, and dreary. The sodden ground, with its litter of dead, mouldering leaves, was swampy and springy, and the horses' feet sank into it at every step, so that the pace was slow. The air was saturated with an earthy, mouldy flavour, and the sombreness and general melancholy were most depressing. François felt this depressing influence in a very marked degree, and he almost wished something would happen by which he could sacrifice his life. He was wet, faint, and cramped, and begged his captors to allow him to get down for a few minutes in order to stretch his limbs, and arouse his sluggish blood. Bastian at last consented to this, not for his

captive's sake, but his own; for he was anxious to refresh himself, and suggested that an attempt should be made to kindle a fire in order that they might dry themselves, and warm some wine they carried with them. They therefore dismounted in a part of the forest where some trees had been felled, and after many ineffectual attempts they at length succeeded in kindling a few sticks into a blaze by saturating pieces with eau-de-vie, of which they had a flask amongst their stores. François had taken part in gathering sticks, and from the moment he alighted from the horse he resolved to make a dash for freedom; but when he glanced round at the impenetrable forest, and remembered that he was totally unarmed, and that his captors were rough, powerful, and even ferocious men, he saw how hopeless it would be to even make the attempt. With a sigh, therefore, he once more resigned himself to his fate. Then, suddenly, he noticed that one of the soldiers had placed his arquebuse against a tree while he had gone off to collect sticks for the fire. The sight of the gun was too much for François. He made a spring for it, seized it, and darted off into the forest. Bastian at the moment was kneeling down blowing the fire with his breath; but realizing in an instant that his prisoner had escaped, he gave vent to a terrible oath, then sprang to his feet and pursued the runaway. On went the fugitive and pursuer, crashing through the wet undergrowth, and plunging knee-deep into the sodden moss which everywhere abounded. Bastian was fleet of foot and determined, and had soon gained on the other. François soon saw that he could not outstrip him; he therefore turned, stopped, and fired his piece at his enemy. Want of deliberation and coolness, however, was fatal to his aim, and the bullet went wide of its mark, finding its billet in the trunk of an oak-tree. With a hoarse growl of sullen rage Bastian bounded forward, and coming within striking distance of the unfortunate youth, he felled him to the ground by a blow from his fist. Then, falling on top of him, he seized him by the throat, and shaking him as a terrier would shake a rat, he hissed in his passion:

‘Satan consume thee, thou son of a witch! Twice now hast thou attempted my life, and were it not that I wish to keep thee for future torture I would break thy ugly pate to mash. Oh, by St. Anthony, but I’ll make thy hide smart for this! Get up, dog!’ As he spoke he kicked François, who,

seeing that all hope had gone, rose mechanically. He was covered with blood from the blow the coward had dealt him, and, half stunned, he staggered along in the direction Bastian indicated. In a few moments the other two men came running up. They had heard the firing of a gun and taken up the chase. When the spot was reached where the horses had been left, Bastian once more bound François with cords, drawing them so tight that they cut into the poor youth's flesh, but never a groan or a murmur escaped his lips. The journey was instantly resumed, and the rain, which had hitherto been a drizzle, commenced to descend in torrents, while a fierce gale rose at the same time, and shrieked like an evil thing through the forest, tearing great branches off the trees, and dashing the rain with stinging force against the horsemen. For hours they rode on, at one time crossing a great open moorland, where wind and rain made progress almost impossible. Then night fell—night pitch-dark, drear, and stormy.

In a little while the dripping, steaming horses were reined in, a horn was blown, a challenge was given and answered, there was a rattling of chains, a lowering of a drawbridge. The horses crossed the bridge and clattered into the paved courtyard of the Lord of Hawksvale's stronghold. François was lifted down, and his bleeding, aching limbs were released from the cords. The flaring light of a single torch, held by an old man, brought into weird relief a group of armed men, all eager and curious to see the new arrival; but beyond this François could make out nothing save the frowning walls of the castle entrance. In a few moments he was roughly seized by the shoulders, pushed forward for some yards, and then through a doorway into a room of some kind, and Bastian's harsh, grating voice growled:

'There's thy lodging for the night.'

The door was shut to with a bang, and the captive was in total darkness without the least idea of the kind of place he was in. He therefore dropped down on the floor, and, utterly worn out, made a pillow of his arm and fell asleep.

CHAPTER LVII.

PARTED FOR EVER.

WHILE François was being conveyed a captive to the stronghold of Hawkswale, the rising storm of public anger against the Queen and her husband was already filling the air with its moaning. So intense was the feeling of indignation against Bothwell, that a confederacy had been formed of some of the most powerful nobles in the land ; the object of this confederacy being the overthrow of the Earl of Bothwell and the punishment of the King's murderers. As rats are said to leave a sinking ship, so did his so-called friends desert him when they saw how hopeless was his cause. Even the traitors and knaves, who had aided and abetted him, assumed a virtue which they did not possess, and went over to the stronger side ; so that it soon became evident the Earl's case was indeed desperate.

Unaware to what extent defection had taken place, and how powerful was the conspiracy against him, Bothwell, although knowing that all his skill and cunning would be required to maintain his position, did not by any means take a gloomy view of matters ; while his royal wife, strong in the belief in her own power over her people, and in her monarchical infallibility, never dreamed of yielding to the clamour of the populace. She was infatuated and fascinated with Bothwell. The history of woman's weakness would almost fail to present a parallel case of blind infatuation, such as led Mary Queen of Scots to peril herself, her son, her throne, and her country. The responsibilities resting on her were ignored ; the welfare of the nation was forgotten ; the stability of her throne was allowed to sap and wither. But soon her eyes were to be opened, with a shock that startled her into a knowledge of the danger that menaced her.

She had summoned her nobles to attend her with their feudal forces, so that an expedition might be sent into Liddesdale, where the borderers were burning and ravishing the country. This expedition was to be commanded in person by Bothwell, but he waited in vain for the nobles and their followers. Not a single one obeyed the royal command ; and then, for the first time, the Queen began to realize how widespread was the

dissatisfaction against her. And with this disobedience the spirit of insurrection displayed itself; several of the nobles raised an army of two thousand men, and marched on Borthwick, where her Majesty was still staying. Their object was to seize Bothwell, and a wing of their army pushed on by a forced march, hoping to surprise the Earl. Bothwell, however, was not quite deserted by his spies and friends, and he was apprised in time that his enemies were sweeping down upon him. After a hasty conference, therefore, with the Queen, he made a precipitate escape, and waited, concealed in a wood, for her to join him. That same evening, with the aid of some faithful attendants, she disguised herself as a man and left the castle on horseback. Bothwell met her about two miles away, and then, both riding the same horse, they sped as fast as the animal could carry them to Dunbar Castle, where they arrived as dawning day was making a silvery gleam on the sleeping sea, for the season was June, and the gentle breath of summer had replaced the fierce ravings of the winter winds.

The Queen was exasperated and angered beyond control, and she and her husband saw that unless they could at once raise a powerful army their cause would be lost. This feeling was strengthened when a little later news was brought to her Majesty that the confederates, disappointed in their attempts against Borthwick, had marched on Edinburgh, intending to hold the capital, and that the people had declared in their favour. The castle had been left by Bothwell in charge of his once friend and co-conspirator, James Balfour. But this man, with the instinct of the rat in the sinking ship, deserted his former companions and joined the stronger side, refusing to point his guns against the rebels. The confederates immediately issued a proclamation, declaring the Queen was unlawfully detained by the Earl of Bothwell, who was openly denounced as the King's murderer, and the people were called upon to aid the nobles against him. The Queen immediately issued a counter-proclamation, in which the confederate lords were arraigned as traitors, and all her faithful subjects were summoned to her standard.

In two days' time she had collected an army of two thousand five hundred men, and then, without a moment's loss of time, she and Bothwell marched against the insurgents, so as to prevent them gaining any accession of strength. The Queen reached Gladsmoor, where she harangued her little army, and

tried to inspire them with courage and devotion. Then, after a short rest, she led her followers to Carberry Hill, six miles from Edinburgh, and at this place she entrenched herself.

In the meantime the confederates, being informed of her coming, marched out to give her battle, and instead of bearing the lion of Scotland as their standard, they carried a huge banner on which was painted a figure representing the murdered King lying under a tree. Beside him the young Prince knelt, and underneath him was written the motto, 'Judge and avenge my cause, O Lord.'

The lugubrious flag had moved and stirred the feelings of the people of Edinburgh as nothing else could have done, and this feeling found expression in threats and menaces—not against the Queen, but against Bothwell. He could not be indifferent to the strong manifestations of anger that were now made against him. But his brute courage did not quail. He had a desperate cause, and was prepared to fight desperately. The two armies had come in sight of each other, the confederates forming in battle array on the heights of Musselburgh. In the Queen's camp was the French Ambassador, and, wishing to avoid bloodshed, he undertook to act the part of a mediator. With this object in view he crossed over to the insurgents, and besought them to lay down their arms. The nobles consented to do this on condition that the Queen would separate herself from the 'wretch, Bothwell,' whom one of the confederates was ready to meet in single combat. From these conditions the leaders swore by oath they would not depart; and downcast and sad, the Ambassador returned to the Queen. He found her, dejected and thoughtful, sitting on a hillock. She expressed herself very bitterly against her subjects who had risen in arms against her. The Frenchman tried to mollify her resentment, and pointed out that the men in arms were still her humble and affectionate servants.

'God's truth!' she exclaimed vehemently, 'they show their affection very ill by running counter to what they have signed, and by accusing the man whom they acquitted, and to whom they have married me.'

Bothwell, who was standing by, heard this, and cried out in a loud voice:

'Is it of me they complain?'

'I have been parleying with them,' answered the Ambassador,

‘and they assure me that they are still her Majesty’s loyal and devoted servants.’

‘What would they then?’ Bothwell demanded imperiously.

The Ambassador lowered his voice as he replied :

‘Since you wish to know, my lord, I will tell you. ‘They declare themselves to be your mortal enemies.’

Bothwell’s face paled a little, and a look of fierceness came into it as he said between his teeth :

‘Why are they my enemies?’

‘Nay, my lord, I know not.’

‘What have I done to them that they should hate *me*?’

‘On that point I am also ignorant,’ answered the Ambassador diplomatically.

‘I will tell you,’ continued the Earl. ‘I have never caused displeasure to a single one of them ; on the contrary, I have sought to consult them all. What they are now doing is out of envy for my greatness. Fortune is free to any who can receive her ; and there is not a man amongst them who would not like to be in my place. But hark ye, sir, and I pray thee deliver my message to them. I have no desire that there should be bloodshed amongst her Majesty’s subjects on my account. Therefore let them send a true man and a gentleman to meet me, and I will fight him to the death between the two armies.’

‘Nay, my lord,’ cried the Queen excitedly, ‘that shall not be. Thy quarrel is mine also, and I shall espouse it—yea, though they drag me from my throne!’

Further conversation was interrupted at this moment, as it was observed that the confederate army was in motion and marching towards them. Bothwell, therefore, moved off hurriedly to marshal his troops ; and, by request of the Queen, the Ambassador crossed the little brook which separated the two armies, in order that he might make a final appeal to the insurgents. Seeking out the principal leaders, he told them that he was commissioned to promise them their Sovereign’s pardon if they would lay down their arms and return to their homes.

‘We are proceeding not against the Queen, but against the Earl of Bothwell,’ cried Morton as spokesman. ‘We have not come here to solicit pardon, but to offer it to those who have offended. Let her Majesty deliver up her husband’s murderer,

or remove him from her company, and then we will render her implicit obedience.'

'That is a saucy demand,' said the Ambassador.

'It is the best we can give, sir,' Morton replied; 'and since we desire not further speech with you, we beg you to withdraw.'

Seeing that his mission had failed, the Ambassador took his leave and returned to Edinburgh. Both armies now advanced towards each other. The mounted men dismounted, and sent their horses to the rear.* Suddenly in the Queen's army discontent manifested itself, and a cry arose that some means must be found to avoid a conflict. The Earl of Bothwell heard this with surprise, and the Queen grew deadly pale with alarm, for there was no mistaking what it meant; indeed, she received immediate confirmation of her fears, as another cry was raised, that as it was Bothwell's quarrel he must decide it personally.

'Ay, that will I,' cried Bothwell with great readiness; and he at once despatched a message to that effect to the confederates, much against the Queen's wish, but she saw that her partisans were falling away, and that she would be left alone. The challenge was instantly accepted, and several champions offered themselves, but were rejected as not being of equal rank to the Earl. At length one was found whose social position was satisfactory. This one was Lord Lindsay, who had been confidential servant to the murdered King. Armed with a mighty two-edged sword, Lindsay stepped out in front of both armies, and falling on his knees, he prayed aloud that God would strengthen his arm, and that it would please Him in His mercy to preserve the innocent, and to vanquish the vicious murderer who had shed the blood of the King.

The unfortunate Queen was in sore distress, for she hesitated to expose her husband to so great a danger, notwithstanding that she beheld with dismay that disorder had spread amongst her army, and that her soldiers were fast deserting. Before she could come to any decision, however, one of the leaders of the confederates, taking advantage of the disorder, wheeled round Carberry Hill with a strong body of men, in order to cut off Bothwell's retreat if he attempted flight. This move-

* This was the custom of the country at the time.

ment caused a panic amongst the royal troops, who immediately disbanded, and the Queen and Bothwell were left with only sixty gentlemen and a band of hackbutters who stood firm.*

The Queen recognised her position with a cry of despair, and, though deprived of every hope of escape, she resolved to save the man she loved. She therefore sent one of her faithful attendants to demand for her an interview with the leader who had made the strategical movement. She was told that the lords would return to their allegiance if the man who stood near her, and was the murderer of the King, was dismissed and she would consent to follow them to Edinburgh. In her dire distress, and seeing no other hope of escape, she consented to do this. Then she turned, with her face wet with tears, to Bothwell, and for a few moments the two conversed together.

‘Farewell, my beloved!’ the Earl cried, much agitated. ‘Farewell, but only for a short time. You will keep the promise of fidelity you have made to me?’

‘Ay, as I hope for mercy,’ she faltered, with a choking sob.

The Earl wrung her hand. His page was waiting with a fleet horse, on to which Bothwell sprang, and, in company with a dozen staunch friends, galloped off towards Dunbar; and, although he did not know it then, he had looked his last on his wife, Mary Queen of Scots.

[NOTE BY THE AUTHOR.—So far as the purpose of this story is concerned, Bothwell will not be mentioned again. His fate, as the reader will no doubt know, was a strange one. With the dauntless courage which characterized him, he equipped four vessels and sailed for the Orkney and Shetland Isles, where he hoped to maintain a footing, and ultimately raise an army in order to deliver the Queen. But his implacable enemy, the Laird Kirkcaldy of Grange, went in pursuit of him with a powerful fleet, and would have succeeded in capturing him had not the ship in which the Laird himself was sailing run on to a sandbank. Two of Bothwell’s ships, however, were seized, and the Earl, finding that resistance was useless, sailed into the Northern Ocean, and was driven by a violent tempest on to the coast of Norway. Here he fell in with a Danish man-of-war, which demanded his papers, but as he could not produce any, he was seized as a pirate and taken to Denmark and imprisoned by the then King, Frederic II., in the romantic Castle of Malmoe. Both the Queen of England

and Murray, the Regent of Scotland, repeatedly demanded his surrender, but the King of Denmark refused to give him up. He thus passed nine years as a captive, almost the whole time in solitude, and with the dread constantly hanging over him that he would ultimately be surrendered. Why the King of Denmark kept him a prisoner so many years has never been satisfactorily explained. It is believed that Bothwell was subsequently poisoned, though this has never been authenticated. That he died in misery and wretchedness, however, is certain, and his closing years must have been a period of agonizing torture.]

CHAPTER LVIII.

FROM DESPAIR TO HOPE.

FRANÇOIS continued to sleep for many hours, and when he awoke daylight revealed to him that he was in a small square chamber with bare walls and a stone floor. It was lighted by three glazed slits, one in each of three sides of the room. In the fourth side was a large open chimney. For furniture there was a wooden stool, a large oak table, and a bedstead. As he glanced round at the bare and cheerless place, he guessed, and guessed rightly, that it was a room in the basement of the entrance tower. He knew perfectly well that he was in the keeping of his *soi-disant* father, and after what had passed, he could not hope for any kindness from Renaud.

His reflections, as one may imagine, were anything but cheering, and for a long time he sat on the bed with his head buried in his hands. In his own misery and misfortunes, he did not forget Adrienne, and he wondered whether she too was confined in this castle of the newly-created Earl of Hawksvale:

‘Basile at least will find out that I have been carried off, and may do something,’ he thought, as he remembered that he had written to Basile giving him particulars of his proposed visit to the Queen, and of his fears that Renaud had abducted Adrienne.

As to what Basile was likely to do, François, of course, could not determine, and, in fact, it was a forlorn hope to expect assistance from him, for what power had he against a man like Renaud? This soon made itself apparent to

François as he reflected, and he grew more despondent than ever.

It was a terrible trial to be cooped and caged there, with no knowledge as to what was next going to happen, and the poor youth, in his wild despair, was half tempted to try and beat his brains out against the stone wall. Then, in order to prevent himself from going mad with inactivity, he paced hurriedly up and down in the confined space. He climbed up to the slits by the aid of the table, but they commanded no view. They only looked into space. He tried the door, but it was as solid as a rock. He peered up the chimney, but there was only impenetrable darkness there. Then he threw himself on the bed again and fairly wept with desperation. Was it possible, he thought, that he who was yet in the spring-tide of his life was to be sacrificed? Would he never again behold Lilian, who was as his heart to him; and was he banished for ever from the Queen, in whose service he would gladly have sacrificed his life?

Hour after hour passed away, and nobody came to him. The solitude, the suspense, the uncertainty, were acute torture, and he became feverish, excited and faint through the mental and nervous strain. Moreover, he was famished with hunger, for he had tasted no food for nearly twenty-four hours. Then it suddenly flashed across his mind that with a refinement of diabolical cruelty Renaud intended to slowly starve him to death. Almost beside himself with this dreadful idea, he rushed at the door, but he might as well have rushed at the solid stone wall. He would have made just as much impression. He was a prisoner in the most literal sense, and all he could do was to try to endure patiently, and wait for what the future might bring. The day had well advanced before his awful suspense received some relief by the sound of a grating key in the lock and the shooting of the ponderous bolt. Then the massive door swung open, and there appeared an old gray-headed servitor bearing some food and drink, while a soldier clad in armour and carrying a pike filled up the doorway.

‘I am not to be slowly starved to death then!’ François exclaimed, as, springing up, he seized a beaker of wine which the old man carried on the platter, and drank a deep draught.

‘By the Mass, but thou hast been nearly forgotten,’ said the old man in a trembling voice. ‘Master Bastian told the

chamberlain to see that thou wert fed, but the chamberlain hath many things on his mind and well-nigh overlooked thee. It was two of the clock when he gave me his command to convey food to thee. And, gramercy, but thou art a pretty stripling, whereas I thought they had confined some formidable mosstrooper. And whence comest thou, and what art thou doing here, child ?

‘Joseph, stop the wagging of thy tongue,’ exclaimed the soldier sternly ; ‘I had orders to see that thou didst not talk to the prisoner.’

‘Good master soldier, do thy duty,’ answered the garrulous old man, ‘and I blame thee not for doing it. Nay, I should despise thee an thou didst not do it. But give me leave, good sir, to ask if thou art a father ? Nay, an thou be not, I swear by this gray beard that thou wilt not find it in thy nature to be harsh with this sweet youth. Beshrew me, but he hath the face of a maid save for the down on his lip. What is thy offence, young sir ? and why has my Lord of Hawksvale brought thee here ?’

During this conversation François had been greedily devouring a cake of meal bread and a slice of salted venison, for he was ravenously hungry, and to satisfy the cravings of Nature was his first consideration.

Joseph was a very old and loquacious man, and was certainly much astonished to find that the formidable ruffian he had expected to see turned out to be a pretty stripling.

‘My Lord of Hawksvale doesn’t know himself,’ said François, in answer to the last part of old Joseph’s question. Then suddenly it flashed through his mind that he might exact from the loquacious old man some information as to whether Adrienne was or was not confined in the castle ; and he made a bold venture by suddenly saying, ‘My Lord of Hawksvale hath a lady here, has he not ?’

‘Ay, in truth a, sweet creature——’

‘Joseph,’ interrupted the soldier commandingly, ‘thou art too free of speech ; gather up thy platter and go thy ways.’

‘Nay, sir, I beg you let him give me the information,’ interposed François. ‘I am an unfortunate youth, and have been cruelly dragged away from those who love me, and whom I love, for no offence. You may believe me, sir ; it is true ; an it be not so, may Heaven forget me. I was a page to the Queen’s Majesty.’

'Come you from the Court, too?' exclaimed Joseph. 'Whv, the lady whom the master has brought here comes from the Court also.'

'Then she is my foster-mother, Adrienne de Bois,' exclaimed François in anguish, and wringing his hands, as his suspicions were thus confirmed.

'Thy foster-mother!' Joseph cried in astonishment. 'God protect us all! But what be the mystery? The lord of the castle is a great man and in the Queen's service; wherefore then does he bring thy foster-mother and thee here as his prisoners?'

Before François could make any reply, the soldier stepped forward, and laying his heavy hand on Joseph's shoulder, said:

'Come, thou must leave. I have my orders.'

Joseph struggled to say something else, but the soldier hustled him out, and swung the door to with a bang. Although physically strengthened by the food he had eaten, François was mentally cast down by the confirmation he had received of his worst fears in regard to Adrienne, who he knew now was in the power of her enemy, Renaud. And the worst of it was that he, being in the same power, was utterly unable to help her. Before many minutes had elapsed the door, once more opened and the soldier returned. He had come back simply out of curiosity. He had only just entered the service of the Earl of Hawkswale, and so knew nothing about him; and with the natural inquisitiveness peculiar to all men, he wished to learn who the lady was who was so carefully guarded in the castle, and what the history of this handsome boy was. Leaning on his pike, he said:

'Thou comest from the Court, boy, an I caught thy words aright?'

'In truth, sir, I do,' cried François, drawing hope from the man's demeanour.

'Wherefore hast thou been carried off?'

'By my soul, I know not, save it be in revenge,' François answered, with great earnestness.

'Revenge!' sneered the soldier, 'who would wish to be revenged on thee? Thou art a mere sucking babe yet.'

'Truly it is a mystery,' said François. 'But the lady who is here is my foster-mother, and she had been abducted by thy lord, who wishes to wed her. But she loves him not; for he is black at heart and treacherous. It is not known at the

‘Curt who hath taken her, but I, suspecting the culprit, denounced him to the Queen’s Majesty; but, alas, I was not believed, and now he has carried me off in order that he may take my life.’

‘Flug me and flay me an they do,’ cried the soldier, ‘an thy story be true thou art deserving of pity, and I would set thee free before thou shouldst be injured.’

Elated and overjoyed at the new hopes the man’s words suddenly raised in his breast, François seized the soldier’s hand and kissed it.

‘Thou art a friend indeed,’ he exclaimed warmly; ‘and be assured that for any service thou mayest render to me, an ample reward will be bestowed upon thee. But tell me, is the Earl of Hawksvale here now?’

‘No; but we have word that he comes within two days.’

‘And the lady, Mademoiselle Adrienne, where is she lodged?’

‘That I know not, for she is not within my keeping. A strange woman, whom I wot not of, hath charge of her.’

‘Canst thou not find out where she is lodged, and then set her and me free? Thy reward shall be great.’

‘Nay, that I cannot do, for I have neither influence nor power. But I promise thee that, an thy story be true, I will render thee what assistance may be within my means. I must go now. For the present, adieu.’

François pressed the man’s hand with great warmth, and when the door had closed and he was once more alone, his hopes had risen so much that his feelings found vent in audible words, and with an expression of stern determination he muttered between his closed teeth:

‘Monsieur Renaud, I am in your power now, but you may be in mine later. And should that come about, beware, for I have a heavy score to reckon with you.’

CHAPTER LIX.

THE COWARD’S TRIUMPH.

IN sending François to Hawksvale, it must not be supposed that Renaud had no definite object in view. He was too shrewd and too far-seeing to take such a step without some

well-formed plan. That he was a man of extraordinary resource and exceptional ability he had proved by the way in which he had raised himself to power, but more particularly by his dealings with the Earl of Bothwell, who, deep and cunning as he was, had been quite outwitted by his rival. If Renaud acted boldly, he none the less acted cautiously, and he was aware that as yet his position was not sufficiently secure to enable him to set the Queen at defiance. But he saw clearly enough that trouble of a very serious nature was brewing, and the rising storm of public passion was making itself too manifest to be ignored. Who might be wrecked and shattered in that storm when it broke in its fury it was not easy to say; for when once the angry mob let loose the flood-gates of its pent-up feelings, it was no respecter of persons. But Renaud read the signs of the brewing storm sufficiently well to be assured that whoever else might escape Bothwell would not. All the outcry and all the menaces were for the moment directed against him, and Renaud experienced a sense of secret joy as he thought to himself:

‘Bothwell is a doomed man, and his career draws to a close; for those whom he has offended are too powerful and too many to let him escape. But when the populace have wreaked their vengeance on him, they may cast their eyes on others, and one of those others may be myself. I must therefore take steps in time.’

In thinking thus he did not for a moment imagine that the Queen herself would be overthrown; but he felt sure that such changes would be effected that he could no longer hope to retain his position; and jealousy and malice would of a surety attack him, and he might be toppled from his position and lose his all by a breath of public opinion. With his small retinue of fifty followers—all he was able to retain—he could not hope to hold his own against even the least powerful noble of the land. For he exercised small feudal sway, and being an alien, could not rally men to his standard.

His plotting and cunning brain saw all these contingencies, and his aim now was to guard against them. So far everything was in his favour. He had Adrienne de Bois in good keeping under his roof, and his plan was to use every endeavour to persuade her to become his wife, in order that he might acquire her fortune. And when that was done he

would retire to France for a time, until the public agitation in Scotland had calmed down.

When chance placed François in his power he saw immediately how he might use the youth as a lever of persuasion with Adrienne. That is to say, by seizing the lad, carrying him to Hawksvale, and threatening him with death if Adrienne would not consent to the marriage, that consent might be won. And so he despatched his faithful creature Bastian and two of his trusted henchmen to convey François to Hawksvale, and Bastian had orders to convey the youth into safe custody and return post haste to the capital. Renaud made this arrangement, for he saw that matters were fast coming to a climax, and before the storm broke he was anxious to get away; for in his border castle with his fifty fighting men he would be safe at least for a time, and if matters came to the worst he could save his skin by riding across the border. But his henchman Bastian was to remain as his lieutenant and spy in Edinburgh, and keep him posted up in all that was going on. As soon, therefore, as the wily Italian had returned, Renaud lost no time in obtaining her Majesty's permission to depart to his castle, on the plea that he wished to arrange his affairs there and consolidate his position. The Queen gave her permission reluctantly, and perhaps would not have given it at all, save that she feared that by withholding it she might make an open enemy of him.

Renaud had already taken care to send all his valuables, including his papers, to his castle, so that he had nothing now to convey with him. He left the capital late at night, choosing that time from motives of personal safety, for he feared that if it were known that he intended to go away he might be stopped. When he had got fairly away he breathed a sigh of relief, and he resolved to return no more until all danger was passed. With one servant as his sole companion, he put spurs to his horse, and on the following evening reached his stronghold. When the drawbridge was drawn up and the massive portcullis lowered he felt safe, and as his servants received him with fawning and cringing he smiled with self-satisfaction.

As soon as he had divested himself of his travel-stained garments, and had fortified himself with supper, he sent for Helen Macdonald.

'How goes thy charge, Helen?' he asked.

'As sullen and obstinate as ever, an it please you, my lord. I have watched her jealously, and guarded her closely lest she should escape.'

'Thou art invaluable, good Helen. But tell me, has she spoken aught of me?'

'Never a word, sire.'

'She has not retired yet?'

'No.'

'Good. Go thou and prepare her for my coming. I would have speech with her before I sleep.'

He had not forgotten his last stormy interview, and he did not expect to be received graciously by his wretched captive. But he had a card to play off against her now in the person of François, and he believed that by threatening to take François's life she would give her consent to marry him. Having assured himself that François was in safe keeping, he proceeded to Adrienne's chamber. She looked pale and ill, and her face wore an expression of sadness and despair. She received him with frigid coldness, and when he approached her with a view to take her hand she shrank away, and exclaimed :

'Though thou hast captured and crushed me, spare me at least from the torture of thy touch.'

'Thy captivity does not seem to have improved thy temper,' he said ironically.

'In truth no,' she answered, 'nor my opinion of thee either.'

'I am sorry for that,' he replied, with affected seriousness. 'She whom a man seeketh to marry should have a good opinion of her future husband.'

'Monsieur Renaud,' she began.

'Pardon,' he said, interrupting her. 'Pardon me for reminding thee that I am the Lord of Hawksvale.'

'My Lord of Hawksvale,' she said with contemptuous smile. 'Thou art right. A woman whom a man seeketh to marry *should* have a good opinion of him who may become the keeper of her heart. But you and I, my Lord of Hawksvale, stand in no such relative position. Thou art the keeper of my person, since thou hast forcibly made me thy prisoner; but my heart thou shalt never keep. Thou mayest break it, but possess it—never!'

He was a little surprised at the energy and determination

she displayed ; but believing that he was still the winner, he showed no concern, but said, with a self-possessed smile :

‘ Be not so sure. I have tried for years to win thy heart, but thou hast withheld it. But my wife thou shalt be, whether I have thy heart or no.’

‘ Never,’ she cried, with passionate energy. ‘ Thou mayest torture me ; burn me piece by piece as thou wilt ; but marry thee I will not.’

Her persistent determination seemed to annoy him, and he made answer, uttering his words slowly, so as to give them more effect :

‘ Adrienne de Bois, a little while ago thou wert in a position to defy me ; thou art so no longer. I have here under this roof, and as a prisoner, François, thy foster-son.’

Adrienne started, and staggering a little from the shock, she exclaimed in faltering accents :

‘ Thou liest ! Thou wouldst not dare to make a prisoner of the Queen’s favourite, even though he be thy son.’

‘ Do not deceive thyself, and rest assured that I lie not. He came to the Court to make a charge against me, which he could not support. He offended her Majesty, who ordered his arrest, and since her Grace’s attention is all required to protect herself from her enraged people, I have taken charge of him, and have had him conveyed here. His life is in thy hands, for shouldst thou refuse to become my wife, I will hang him.’

Adrienne almost fell to the ground as this dreadful threat was uttered ; for her knowledge of the man left her little room to doubt that he would put his threat into execution. He had acquired power, and had become a despot, and as is almost invariably the case with such men, cruelty was part of his nature. It must be borne in mind that Adrienne was perfectly well aware that between Renaud and François there was no love, and though the knowledge that Renaud was not his father had been kept from her both by François and Basile, she knew that Renaud detested his supposed son, and that the detestation was returned with interest.

In a few moments she rallied from the shock that Renaud’s threat had given her, and with a considerable show of firmness, she said :

‘ Thou art cruel and deceitful, that I know, but I will not

believe thou wouldst be so barbarous as to injure thine own flesh and blood. But why, I ask, shouldst thou wish to force me into an odious union. For odious it would be, 'since' I could never give thee wifely love. Wherefore persecute me then with thy advances? Is it not better that thou shouldst seek some lady who will be able to appreciate thee?'

'No,' he answered; 'an I have not thee I will have no one. I have set my mind on marrying thee, and thou shalt become my wife, or cease to live.'

'Then infinitely rather would I cease to live,' she exclaimed vehemently.

He smiled disdainfully as he made answer :

'But thy foster-son—what of him? I swear that an thou wilt not become my wife, I will hang him on the battlements before thy eyes.'

'Thou wouldst not dare do such a cold-blooded and wicked deed,' she said, with a shudder of horror.

'Would not dare!' he cried. 'Trust not too much on the "Would not dare," or thou mayest find thou hast deceived thyself. He shall as surely die, shouldst thou refuse me, as it is certain that I am standing here now.'

Adrienne was so horrified, as she saw how brutal the man's nature was, that she covered her face with her hands and wept. Her grief seemed to exert some little effect on Renaud, or perhaps he deemed it prudent to make a show of gentleness, for he said in softer tones :

'Distress not thyself so much. Take time to consider. Thou shalt have three whole days and nights to ponder upon the subject. At the end of that time let thy decision be in my favour. François shall then go free, and thou shalt find thou hast not done badly after all.'

'François is here, you say?' she asked suddenly, looking up at him, and as though a new idea had struck her.

'Ay, he is my prisoner, and well guarded.'

'Bring him face to face with me, then, and I will hear what he has to say.'

Renaud hesitated for some moments before answering. He seemed to be weighing the matter in his mind. At last he spoke, but cautiously :

'I will think over thy request. Perhaps I may grant it, and let thee see him to-morrow. And now good-night.' He approached nearer, as though he wished to embrace her, but

she shrank away in dread, and he said: 'Wilt thou give me one little kiss?'

'No,' she said with a shudder. 'Leave me, I beg.'

Her refusal seemed to anger him again, and he replied sharply:

'So be it. Thou hast three days before thee in which to come to thy senses. Thou wilt change thy mind before the end of the time. And now, good-night.'

He left the room hurriedly, and then Adrienne, unable to control her feelings longer, wept passionately; but after a while she grew calmer, and kneeling down, prayed fervently.

CHAPTER LX.

HOW FRANÇOIS BEARDED THE EARL IN HIS HALL.

THE day following his interview with Adrienne, the Earl of Hawksvale had François brought before him and addressed him thus:

'François, we meet under strange circumstances, and thou wilt now perhaps recognise that I am no longer to be trifled with, and that thy opposition to me must cease. It were well for thee if thou wouldst see this, for though thou hast been ungrateful, I would fain do thee service. Thou art now my prisoner, and thy life is in my hands, for thou hast offended the Queen grievously, and she has deputed me to deal with thee as I may deem fit. But thy life shall be spared, and thou mayest regain thy liberty by complying with my wishes.' He paused, expecting an answer, and François, standing erect, and looking proud and defiant, said:

'And thy wishes, sir, what are they?'

Renaud was annoyed at the brusque manner of his prisoner, and he gave evidence of his annoyance in his dark face.

'Obedience to my commands,' he answered sternly.

'And thy commands—are what?'

'Thou shalt know. Thy foster-mother is beneath this roof at the present moment.'

'Coward and liar!' cried François passionately, and interrupting him. 'Hast thou no blushes for this shameless confession? When I accused thee before the Queen's Majesty of abducting Mademoiselle Adrienne, thou gavest stout denial to it.'

‘Of course I did, fool,’ hissed Renaud fiercely. ‘Hast thou lived so long at Court as to be entirely ignorant of the wiles of diplomacy? Didst think me so lacking in brains that I should employ a herald to proclaim my affairs? My secrets are mine alone.’

‘I have lived long enough to have learnt the difference between truth and dastardly falsehood,’ returned François boldly, ‘and I denounce thee now as a false knave.’

‘Have a care!’ growled Renaud with flashing eyes and darkening brow, as he unsheathed his dagger in a menacing way.

‘Oh, strike, sir, an thou wilt,’ said François with a despairing sigh. ‘Thou hast inflicted pain and torture enough on me and those I love, and thou hast only to crown thy cruelty now by slaying me. Perhaps it were better so, for it is a hard world, and I find life full of cares.’

‘Poor idiot!’ sneered Renaud, as he restored his dagger to its sheath. ‘Thou hast o’er much sentiment in thee, and thou wilt be a fool all thy life.’

‘Better a fool than a knave,’ retorted François.

‘A truce to this,’ said Renaud impatiently. ‘I brought thee here for a purpose—that purpose must be fulfilled.’

‘Thou hast not yet told me what it is.’

‘I would wed with thy foster-mother,’ pursued Renaud. ‘But she is obstinate and opposes me. Thou hast influence over her, and canst persuade her to accede to my wishes. Thou promised to do this once before, but failed me. Now things are different. An you play no trick with me this time, thou shalt see Adrienne and talk to her, and on thy success or failure thy life depends.’

Although François felt disposed to give vent to his disgust by a free expression of thought, he wisely refrained, recognising that he was truly in the power of this man, against whom it would be useless to strive at present. So he said:

‘I would learn the views of my foster-mother first. Wilt thou take me to her?’

Renaud hesitated for a moment, then said:

‘Yes; follow me.’

He led the way to Adrienne’s chamber. The meeting between her and François was of a very affectionate nature, and she embraced him warmly. In her joy she forgot for the

moment that she was in the hands of her enemy, and she said incautiously, addressing Renaud :

‘I thank thee for this moment, and I would fain believe thou art not the monster I erstwhile thought thee to be. This poor boy has already suffered much. And though he may have given thee some annoyance, he is thy son, and thou must advance his interests.’

‘I will give him power and wealth, an he obeys me ; and for thy sake,’ said Renaud.

François disengaged himself from Adrienne’s clasp, and looking into her pensive eyes, said :

‘Sweet mother o’ mine, thou must make no sacrifices for me.’

‘Have a care!’ muttered Renaud threateningly.

‘Tell me, dear one,’ asked François, without heeding Renaud, and taking Adrienne’s hand, ‘is it thy desire to become the wife of this——’ He paused and hesitated, as if not quite sure of the term he should use. Then he said boldly and contemptuously, ‘*of this man.*’

Renaud went white with anger. Usually cool and collected in trying circumstances, he lost control over himself when contending with François. He had come to regard the youth with so much dislike and contempt that his passion got the better of him when the lad thwarted him. He had overcome so many obstacles, had raised himself so high, and had not hesitated to pit himself against such a master of craft and deceit as the Earl of Bothwell, that he could not brook a check from so insignificant a personage as François.

‘Put a curb on thy tongue, boy,’ he said sternly, ‘for thou breathest not free air at present. It were better for thyself that thou shouldst remember who I am.’

Catching up this unguarded remark, François made a point of it, and said with withering irony :

‘I remember but too well, sir, who thou art.’ Then turning to Adrienne : ‘Thou hast not answered my question. I will repeat it. Is it thy wish that thou shouldst become the wife of this——most noble gentleman, the Earl of Hawksvale ?’

The latter sarcasm stung Renaud, and he mentally resolved that François should suffer for it. Adrienne was much distressed, for she remembered the dark threat of the previous night, and Renaud’s sinister face told her now she had nothing

to hope for if she went contrary to his wishes. François noticed her hesitancy and distress, and guessing the cause, he drew away from her for a few paces, and speaking with strong emphasis and feeling, he exclaimed :

‘Adrienne, my mother, I charge thee in the name of the Virgin Mary, whom we both adore, to answer me as thy heart would speak. Wilt thou be wife to this man by thine own free will and wish?’

She seemed almost overcome, and clasping her hands as if in mute appeal, she bowed her head, and faltered :

‘My heart says “No.”’

‘Then rather than that thou shouldst be polluted by his touch, we will die together,’ said François, with startling determination.

Renaud was altogether taken by surprise by this unexpected boldness, and with fierce passion he drew his dagger, and sprang towards François, but with the quickness of thought Adrienne threw herself between them, and in agonizing accents, cried out :

‘No, no ! For God’s good love, shed not the boy’s blood ! He is thy son.’

Renaud slunk back before that passionate invocation, and sullenly sheathed his weapon again. François, in no way daunted, but on the contrary seeming to become more bold and defiant, said :

‘Adrienne, the moment has come when thou must be undeceived, and the truth shall be revealed. This man who would break thy heart, and make me his catspaw, is a miserable impostor, and cannot claim an atom of kinship with me. I am not his son.’

Adrienne looked in amazement from one to the other. François was a picture of stern defiance, while Renaud, by the working of his mouth and his fiercely flashing eyes, showed that he was foiled, but not beaten. He recovered his self-possession in a few moments, and then with intense bitterness asked :

‘And since thou canst assert with such confidence that I am not thy father, perhaps thou wilt enlighten Adrienne as to whose spawn thou art?’

As he uttered these words he watched narrowly the face of François, and he saw how, as he intended it should, the sting went deeply into the boy’s soul. He saw the face pale to

deathly white, and then dye to the hue of crimson, as the burning blush of shame and indignation spread itself out to the very roots of the curly hair. And as he noted the effect of his cowardly question he smiled coldly and said :

‘Thou dost not answer. Thy tongue, erst so free, seems paralyzed now. Wherefore is it so?’

Adrienne spoke. She seemed faint and ill, and her voice was low :

‘François, is it true what thou hast said?’

With a look of tortured pride on his handsome features, François replied :

‘Ay, good mother, as God will judge us. I bear no drop of that man’s blood in my veins!’

‘Then, who is thy father?’ demanded Renaud, with fiery vehemence.

‘I know not,’ returned the boy, with equal passion. ‘But an he were a beggar, he were a better man than thee!’

‘Poor fool!’ snarled Renaud spitefully. ‘Thou shouldst at least learn not to make statements and charges before thou hast proof of thy assertions. Thou camest to the Queen’s Majesty to accuse me, and thou brought thyself into disgrace for thy pains. Now thou deniest that thou art my offspring, and yet thou hast no knowledge of those who gave thee birth!’

François seemed overwhelmed and abashed, for what answer could he make? He had covered his eyes with his hand, and appeared to be suffering keenly. Adrienne was also much distressed, and appealing to Renaud, she said in piteous accents :

‘Monsieur, I charge thee tell me truly : Is that youth thy son or no?’

He curled his lip scornfully as he replied :

‘Mademoiselle Adrienne, thou art not my confessor, and I’ll answer no questions of thine ; at least, I’ll not answer that one now. For François thou bearest a mother’s love, though he be not thy kin.’

‘Ay, as heaven witnesseth, I love him with a mother’s devotion!’

‘Then wilt thou save his life?’

‘At the sacrifice of my own,’ she exclaimed, with gathering energy.

‘I ask no such sacrifice,’ Renaud pursued. ‘I ask thee only to become my wife.’

François suddenly roused himself from the stupor that

seemed to have come over him, and seizing Adrienne in his arms he strained her to him, and exclaimed with despairing energy :

‘ Better far, dear mother, that thou shouldst die than let thy heart be shattered by this knave. Let us dare him to do his worst, and we will put our trust in Heaven.’

Renaud’s patience was exhausted. With a sudden and adroit movement he seized François by the arm, and swinging him forcibly round, hurled him to the side of the room, so that he staggered against the wall. Then standing between him and Adrienne, he cried to the latter :

‘ Thou canst save that fool, and set him free. Wilt thou do it?’

‘ How?’ she asked.

‘ By consenting to be my wife.’

‘ Never!’ she said with determination, ‘ unless it is his wish!’

‘ Thou hast heard thy mother’s answer, boy,’ cried Renaud ; ‘ save thyself and her!’

François had recovered himself, and had glanced nervously round the room as if in search of something he might use as a weapon ; but nothing presented itself. And now, with fiery passion working in his veins, he ground his teeth, and hissed out :

‘ Rather would I strangle the life out of thy foul body!’

Then he made a sudden spring forward and seized Renaud by the throat ; but Renaud seemed to have been expecting something of the sort, and was on his guard, and being a powerful man, he hurled the youth from him again, and so violently that he staggered and fell on the floor. Renaud once more drew his dagger and aimed a blow at the prostrate youth, but with a wild scream of horror Adrienne threw herself on him and arrested the blow.

‘ Pity, pity, for my sake!’ she moaned.

‘ Thou hast saved him for the present,’ Renaud snarled. Then he put a small silver whistle to his lips and blew it, and in a few moments Helen Macdonald entered. ‘ See to the lady,’ was Renaud’s stern command. Without uttering a word Helen lifted the now almost fainting Adrienne in her powerful arms and bore her to a couch. Renaud walked to the door then, and blew two shrill blasts on his whistle, and at once two of his guards hurried up. ‘ That youth has made an attack upon my life,’ he said. ‘ Convey him hence to the tower guard-room, and bind him hand and foot. And as you value your lives keep him well.’

The men obeyed their tyrant's bidding, and seized François roughly. He had already risen to his feet, and was panting and pallid, but his pride and his spirit were not broken, and as the men took him from the room he said with suppressed energy, 'Sweet mother, be true to thyself and me and defy this knave !'

CHAPTER LXI.

A STORY OF WRONG AND SHAME.

It would not be easy to describe Renaud's state of mind as he saw that his cunningly devised plans for the advancement of his interest were likely to be frustrated by the sheer and dogged obstinacy of François. His hopes that he would be able to coerce Adrienne into becoming his wife, if he got François into his power, had received a rude shock ; and now he began to doubt whether after all he would succeed in carrying out his purpose. In fact, when he reflected on his position he saw good cause to feel some uneasiness, for public anger had been making itself manifest in no uncertain manner against the conspirators who had brought about the King's death, and he had been indicated in the anonymous placards as one of the aiders and abettors of the crime. Therefore he might at any moment find himself a prisoner, and his newly-acquired estates forfeited.

Naturally this thought made him extremely anxious to secure himself against any contingency that might arise, and in the present state of affairs he felt that his truest security lay in placing distance between himself and strife-torn Scotland. But if he retired now to his native country he would have to go with very limited means, for he could not realize his estate. Of course, if he could succeed in inducing Adrienne to become his wife, he would at once obtain control of her large fortune, and what was more, in his own country too, for Adrienne's property was mostly situated in Paris.

It will thus be seen that his inducements to persevere in the desperate venture he had started on were very great ; but his tactics so far had proved a failure. He had got both Adrienne and François under his roof as captives. He was the feudal lord of the estate, and in that capacity held the power of life and death in his hand. If he ordered his myrmidons to hang

François they would in all probability obey his commands, but then that would not advance his cause one iota, if Adrienne remained obstinate. To gain her fortune he must be legally united to her, and he could not be legally united to her without her consent.

For two or three days she remained in a prostrate condition, consequent on the shock and fright she had received. And he was sullen and fretful as he saw with alarm that the violence he had resorted to was calculated to thwart his own cause by bringing about Adrienne's death. He therefore bestowed unusual attention and care upon her; and tried to impress her with the belief that he was deeply concerned for her welfare. It was not until the third day that she showed unmistakable signs of rallying from the prostration, and then her first anxiety was for François.

Renaud had only visited her two or three times since that terrible night, and then merely to ascertain her symptoms and prescribe for her; but Helen Macdonald had been her constant attendant. Helen had received instructions from her master to show every care and attention to the invalid, and to treat her with kindness. This woman had everything to gain if the marriage was brought about, as Renaud had promised her a considerable sum of money, and so it was by no means to her interest to treat the unfortunate prisoner with harshness. Personally she could have no ill feeling against Adrienne, for she knew very little of her, their respective positions at the Court keeping them wide apart, and therefore in lending herself to the cowardly plot of the abduction she was actuated solely by mercenary greed. She was, however, a woman of violent temper, and liable to take strong and unreasonable prejudices which were calculated to make her a dangerous and treacherous enemy.

As already stated, Adrienne's great anxiety was for François, and she questioned Helen about him. But the woman was unable to give her any information, for she really knew nothing, though it gave her the opportunity to plead her employer's cause.

'Wherefore art thou so stubborn, sweet lady?' she began. 'My Lord of Hawksvale is a worthy and honourable gentleman, and thou wouldst do well to become his wife!'

'Hast thou much interest in this business?' Adrienne asked languidly, and yet with point in her question.

Helen was not quite prepared for such a question, but she made the best of it and answered :

‘I have my lord’s interest at heart, for he is a kindly gentleman!’

‘Thy measure of his kindness is, no doubt, regulated by the extent of his liberality towards thee,’ Adrienne remarked dryly.

‘In faith, madame,’ exclaimed Helen somewhat tartly, ‘we all have our hearts set on this world’s gear. Some have plenty and some have none at all, and those who lack it think well of those who bestow even small favours upon them.’

‘Thy doctrine is the doctrine of selfishness, and, Heaven be praised! it is not common to everyone,’ said Adrienne. ‘But we will not discuss that now. It seems clear that thou art willing to lend thyself to any work by which thou mayest gain money, which, after all, is a sorry thing to put one’s whole faith in.’

‘Rich folk may preach that, but we who are poor haven’t much inducement to put faith in aught else,’ growled Helen. ‘It is easy to be honest when one wants for nothing, but a hungry belly respects not another man’s meal.’

‘Well, well,’ said Adrienne testily, and having no desire to enter into an argument with the woman, ‘we will not prolong the subject. For any attention thou mayest be inclined to show to me and to my foster-son thou shalt be well rewarded. And now to thy master, and bid him come to me, for I would have speech with him; and after that thou canst return, and I will tell thee something.’

Helen seemed a little surprised, and the look of cupidity in her small eyes did not escape Adrienne, who believed that she might turn the woman to account.

In accordance with the order, Helen retired, and in less than a quarter of an hour Renayd came. He was a little excited and flushed, for the message raised a hope in his breast that his captive had relented, and was about to announce her acquiescence to his desires; but his hopes fell again as he looked at her face, which seemed to give him no encouragement. He paid her some little compliment, which, however, she did not notice, but said frigidly :

‘My Lord of Hawksval, François made a statement the other night, which, if true, would indicate that thou hast been guilty of a most cowardly act of deception. I do not doubt François, but I wish confirmation from thee, and I charge thee solemnly to tell me if François is thy son.’

Renaud was thrown into a little confusion by the unexpected question, but he quickly recognised that to attempt to keep up the deception any longer would be useless, and so he answered boldly, and said :

‘François spoke truly. He is not my son!’

‘Then do I rejoice greatly,’ Adrienne remarked.

‘Whence comes thy joy?’ demanded Renaud sharply.

‘At the thought that François, noble and true as he is, is not the offspring of so unworthy a man!’

‘Thy words are cutting, madame, and even bold for one who is my prisoner!’ cried Renaud warnly.

‘Monsieur Renaud—or, an thou preferest, my Lord of Hawksvale, thou camest to the Court of the Queen’s Majesty under false pretences. Thou hast climbed to thy position by fraud and deceit. Thou hast used that unfortunate youth as a ladder wherewith to rise, and now that thou hast risen thou wouldst destroy the ladder. Canst thou say thou art a man of honour, with such charges as these against thee?’

‘I am not here to discuss points of honour with thee,’ he answered disdainfully. ‘The past is gone, and cannot be recalled. The future is before us, and thou must become my wife.’

‘Thou art a strange wooer, my lord,’ Adrienne returned scornfully. ‘A woman’s heart is won not by force and menaces, for it cannot love the hand that would crush it, nor the tongue that would sting it. But since thou art not the boy François’s father, thou must know something of his parents. Who were they?’

‘His mother was killed, as thou wilt remember, on the day of the Queen’s marriage to the Dauphin,’ Renaud replied after some hesitation, and wondering what the questions were leading up to.

‘Ay, I remember but too well.’ Then fixing her eyes on Renaud’s face, she said, ‘But his father—hast thou knowledge of him?’

A strange smile came into Renaud’s face as this question was put. It was a smile that clearly and unmistakably indicated a sense of malicious joy—the joy that one experiences when he knows that he can strike his enemy a deadly blow. Renaud felt perhaps that the moment and the circumstances were fitting for a revelation, and that the deceptive character he had so long kept up was now no longer possible. Or perhaps what weighed with him more than aught else was

the craving desire to do his rival an irreparable injury, so he answered and said :

‘ Yes. I know the boy’s father !’

‘ Does he still live ?’

‘ To his shame he does !’

‘ And his name ?’

‘ *Is Basile !* erstwhile Jester to the Queen’s Majesty, and the man who would have dishonoured thee !’

If Renaud expected Adrienne to be startled at this revelation, he must have been strangely disappointed, and equally puzzled, for she betrayed no sign that she was in any way surprised, but quietly remarked :

‘ I suspected it.’

‘ Didst thou really ?’ said Renaud ironically, and evidently annoyed at her apparent want of interest. ‘ And wherefore didst thou suspect it ?’

‘ From many reasons,’ she answered ; ‘ but perhaps chiefly because Basile repeatedly warned me against thee, and said thou wert an impostor !’

The expression of intense irritation and anger that displayed itself in Renaud’s face told how those words cut him. And forgetting for once the caution which was his habit, and entirely led away by this feeling of annoyance, and bitter hatred for his rival, he exclaimed with half-smothered fierceness :

‘ If I am an impostor, what name wouldst thou apply to him ? He is thy lover. Ah ! thy conscience pricks, eh ? But listen to what manner of man he is to whom thou wouldst sell thine honour, and on whom thou wouldst bestow thy gold.’

‘ I will not hear thy scandal,’ cried Adrienne, feeling some alarm at his passionate manner. ‘ It was not for that I sent for thee.’

‘ But thou shalt hear me !’ he exclaimed, forgetting himself in his burning desire to sully and ruin his rival. ‘ This fool, this traitorous dog whom thou hankerest after, is a betrayer and a deeply-dyed knave. Years ago, in the palace of Francis II. of France, was a pretty serving wench, who fell into the toils of this smooth-tongued lover of thine.’

‘ Insult me no further !’ Adrienne cried, as she buried her face in her hands.

‘ Thou *shalt* hear the story now !’ he hissed with joyful feelings as he saw how deeply he was cutting into the heart of his victim. ‘ This pretty wench, whose name was Berthe

Corvin, bore thy lover a child, and he was named François. The story is not a pretty one as it is, but the sequel will ^{be} top it. Basile, thy lover, became alarmed at Berthe's opportunities to him to marry her. He had previously sent her to her uncle at Rouen, and now he arranged to pay the uncle a considerable sum of money to poison Berthe and her child. The uncle took the money, but didn't do the deed, though he led his nephew, *thy lover*, to believe he had. Instead, he sent the mother and child to Bordeaux, to her mother, who kept a tavern, and told her that Basile would join her there and marry her. But need I tell thee that he did not, and Berthe soon consoled her grief by getting another lover. In a little while he deserted her, her mother died, and she was left destitute. Then she made her way on foot with her child to Paris, for she had heard that the young Queen of Scots was to marry the Dauphin; she put her sad story into a letter, first resolving to present that letter to the Queen as she returned from her wedding, hoping that the Queen would thereby be moved, and command Basile to make the suppliant an honourable wife.'

He paused to see the effect the story had had upon her. She was still covering her face with her hands, and was much agitated; but looking at him with misty eyes as he paused, she asked, in a voice hoarse with emotion:

'How camest thou to know all this?'

He smiled with self-satisfaction as he answered:

'Fate played into my hands. Poor Berthe, as thou art aware, was crushed and trampled on by the restive horses at the very moment that she had all but reached the Queen's coach. Bleeding and mangled, she was conveyed to the lodgings of some strangers. A surgeon was called for. I was near and volunteered my services. The woman died; but before she died, she gave me the letter and asked me to deliver it to the young Queen.'

'And you broke thy promise?' said Adricenne quickly.

'I did. I was very poor. Fortune had mocked me. But, as Heaven will judge us, I was honest up to then—ay, and was willing to sacrifice myself for others' sake. But a temptation to read that letter came upon me that I was powerless to resist. I wanted to learn who the woman was, and what her object was in addressing the Queen. I yielded to the temptation. I learnt the story as I have given it to thee, and then

I saw how I might make it a stepping-stone to fortune. The child had been taken to the palace. That I knew, and my first impulse was to see Basile, and demand gold from him on the threat of exposure. But reflection showed me a better way to riches. Ambition prompted me, and I resolved to say I was the child's father; for I felt sure the Queen would do something for me--and who could contradict me? Not the dead woman, and the Jester dare not, for had I not written evidence that he had sought to murder the woman whom he had dishonoured? Thou knowest how well I have succeeded. I have climbed from poverty and neglect to high estate, and now the crowning act must be the wedding with thee.'

'It is a pitiable story,' moaned Adrienne in sore distress. 'But what if I refuse to become thy wife?'

'Then François dies,' Renaud returned with savage determination. 'If thou hast not consented in twenty-four hours, I will hang him. My patience is exhausted.'

Adrienne appeared to be overpowered for several moments with some stifling emotion, but she recovered herself; and knowing how useless it was to still further irritate this man by telling him how she loathed him, she said:

'Give me till to-morrow, I will then frame my answer.'

'So be it,' he said. 'On that answer François's life depends.'

He left the room, and when she was alone Adrienne was unable to control her bursting heart any longer, but gave way to hysterical sobbing.

CHAPTER LXII.

'BE SILENT AS DEATH, AND FOLLOW ME LIKE MY SHADOW.'

IN about an hour Helen Macdonald returned. Adrienne had recovered her composure then--at any rate, so far that she gave no outward signs of the storm she had passed through, save in the deathly pale face and the bloodshot eyes.

'Helen,' she said in a sad voice--'Helen, thou art a woman, and canst surely feel for one of thy sex whose heart is broken and whose hopes are destroyed. Wilt thou render me a service?'

'Ay, an I can do it without going against my Lord of Hawksvale, whose money I value.'

'It is a question of money with thee,' said Adrienne in disgust.

'Truly so,' answered the woman, with a toss of her head. 'Are we not all struggling after riches?'

'Some of us are—not all,' returned Adrienne, with a melancholy sigh. 'But listen. Thou seest this necklet? It is set with diamonds, and is worth a larger sum than thou art likely to receive from thy master for many a day. The gold medallion attached to it falls not far short of it in value. Both these gewgaws shall be thine, an thou wilt carry a letter for me to Berwick.'

Helen's greedy and avaricious eyes opened to their fullest extent, and she said quickly:

'Give them to me, and I will do thy message.'

'I shall give them to thee on completion of the service,' answered Adrienne flatly. 'When thou hast brought me a sign that thou hast delivered my letter into the hands of Basile at Berwick, then these trinkets shall be thine, and not till then.'

After some hesitation Helen replied:

'When dost thou want thy message taken?'

'Immediately, an it is possible.'

'That may be difficult, but I will undertake to send it for thee.'

'Good! Return in an hour then, and my letter shall be ready.'

When Adrienne was once more alone she indited the following epistle to Basile:

'My love to thee, and greetings and wishes for thy welfare. Thou must release me from my pledges, for all is at an end between us. Sore trouble afflicts us, but for thee the future may hold happiness, and will bring thee forgiveness for thy error; for me there is only sorrow and darkness. But thou must not think of me. I sacrifice myself to save *thy son*. I know thy story, and pity thee. I charge thee, an thou hast respect for me, seek me not. It were better that I were forgotten. Teach thy son duty, honour, and uprightness, and make him a loyal and staunch servant to the Queen's majesty, whom the saints protect. Farewell. This comes from one who hath pleasing memories of thee—Adrienne. Send me a sign that thou hast received this.'

She tied this letter with red ribbon and sealed it with her seal: and when Helen returned she delivered it into her hands.

For the rest of the day Adrienne remained alone. Renaud came not near her, much to her relief. But nevertheless her hours of solitude were very bitter, and she had to endure a conflict with herself. She felt that she loathed and despised Renaud, but she would become his wife if it would save François. She was moved by a holy unselfishness, and for the youth's sake she would crush her own heart, for she loved him with all the tenderness and devoted love of a true mother.

While Adrienne was revolving these things in her tortured mind, how fared it with the object of her solicitations?

It will be remembered that after that violent scene in Adrienne's chamber, when Renaud had come within an ace of taking François's life, the unfortunate youth was dragged away and imprisoned once more in the room he had first occupied; and, following out the letter of their command, the soldiers bound him with cords, so that he was powerless to move, and in this cruel position they left him.*

For three or four hours he remained undisturbed. The cords cut into his flesh and tortured him; but his mental distress was greater than his physical sufferings, for all seemed lost. His last hopes had vanished, and the woman for whom he bore a son's affection must be sacrificed, and he could not stir a finger to save her. How he cursed his folly now—that precipitate folly that had led him into this serious position! He knew that Renaud hated him, and he knew that he could expect no mercy from him, unless he used his persuasive powers with his foster-mother, and urged her to become the wife of Renaud. But he could take no other view of that course than that it was base and cowardly; and baseness he

* It will not be inopportune to state here that castles similar to the one here described were in these feudal days governed with a sort of military despotism. The governor or owner, as the case might be, had the power of life and death in his hands, and he was not slow to exercise this power; and trivial offences were often severely punished, the offender not infrequently being hanged. This sort of stern discipline was in full force in Scotland, especially in the border strongholds, during Mary's reign, for the law of the country was too lax and too inefficient to deal with the powerful nobles, who simply made laws of their own for ruling their retainers, and generally exercised these laws with an iron hand.

scorned, and cowardice was no part of his nature, young as he was.

‘I will die,’ he thought to himself—‘die twenty times over rather than urge my foster-mother to ally herself to so contemptible a knave.’

Towards the close of the day he was visited by Renaud, who was accompanied by the soldier who had already shown sympathy for François.

‘Hast thou come to thy senses, boy?’ demanded Renaud imperiously.

‘If to come to my senses is to hate thee more bitterly than ever, then have I come to my senses in very truth,’ answered François, with scorn and defiance in his look and tone.

‘Thy saucy tongue shall be nipped, an it learns not more respect for thy betters,’ said Renaud.

‘Thou mayest tear it out, an that would give thee pleasure,’ answered François boldly, ‘for rest assured it will never speak well of thee.’

Renaud seemed somewhat at a loss how to deal with this refractory prisoner. He had come to him hoping to find him in a more tractable mood; but instead of that, although cruelly bound and obviously suffering physical pain, he appeared more obstinate and more defiant.

‘If thou art not blind to reason,’ he said—‘if thou art not indifferent to her who has been a mother to thee, thou wilt change thy temper. Remember, thou hast made an attempt upon my life, but I will forgive thee for that, an thou wilt do my wishes.’

‘I want neither thy pity nor thy forgiveness,’ returned François loftily.

Renaud saw clearly that in his present frame of mind he could do no good with him; so, turning to the attendant, he said:

‘Kenneth, loosen these cords.’

Then, as the man carried out this order, not without some difficulty—for the cords had been cruelly knotted—Renaud continued:

‘Thou shalt have the freedom of thy limbs,’ he said, ‘and when thou hast recognised my power and obeyed my bidding, thou shalt be free to leave here at any moment. But thy senses seem to have left thee now. I will try if starvation will bring thee back to reason. See to it, Kenneth, for two days thy charge will fast absolutely. Dost understand?’

‘Ay, master,’ Kenneth answered somewhat gruffly.

‘On the third day thou mayest give him a stoup of water and a small measure of dried meal. If he has not learnt better manners by that time, we will try what a week’s fasting will do. Long fasting tameth the tiger; mayhap, it will also tame this very fiery youth.’

François made no reply. A sense of blank despair seemed to take from him the power of speech. This did not escape the quick eyes of Renaud, who smiled almost imperceptibly as he thought that already he had made an impression; and when he had broken the proud spirit of this youth with hunger, he would be able to completely mould him to his will.

He left the cell with Kenneth; and when François heard the bolts of the door shoot into their sockets, he felt as if the iron was going into his heart. With a groan of soul-wrung agony he threw himself on the narrow couch, and wished that he had some means of taking his life.

He must have slept, and slept a long time, and he was awakened at last by a grating noise as of a large key in a lock, and starting up, he saw a dim light appear near the doorway, and then a voice asked in low accents:

‘Art thou awake, son?’

François sprang up, and feeling sure that the voice was a friendly one, he answered:

‘Ay, I am awake. What wouldst thou with me?’

‘Hist!’ said the voice. ‘I am Kenneth. I have brought thee food.’

François jumped forward, and threw his arms round the man’s neck, exclaiming:

‘Thou art a friend. Heaven hath surely sent thee. Thou wilt befriend me and set me free, wilt thou not?’

‘Here is wine and a venison-pasty for thee; despatch it quickly. An thou were a wild wolf, my Lord of Hawksvale could not treat thee worse. But may Satan blacken me if I starve thee even at my lord’s bidding!’

The man put down his lantern on the floor, and the pasty and the wine he placed on the table, inviting François to fall to at once; and without more ado, the prisoner drank a deep draught of the wine and then tackled the pasty, for he had been many hours without food and was faint with hunger.

‘I am interested in thee,’ said Kenneth after a long pause, wiping a tear from his weather-beaten cheek, ‘for thou re-

mindest me of my own son. 'Thou hast the same hair and the same eyes, and he was just such another handsome and shapely youth as thyself.' The rough soldier here sobbed, and then added with a great sigh: 'He is in heaven now—the saints love him! He and his mother were carried off by the plague years ago.'

'For thy son's sake, then, help me, for I am a most unfortunate youth,' cried François, quickly taking advantage of this reminiscence to reach Kenneth's heart. 'And for thy dead wife's sake, help the sweet lady whom thy master also holds captive; he seeks to force her to wed him, though she loathes him. But she hath a fortune, and it is the fortune he craves.'

'I may help thee, but I see not how I can help her,' said Kenneth thoughtfully.

'Yes; thou mayest help her through me,' cried François. 'Place me outside of this cursed place, and I will try and do the rest.'

'It is not so easy as thou wouldst imagine; but my heart is moved for thee, and thy likeness to my dead son stirs me to make a desperate venture in thy behalf. But an I can set thee free, I must go too, or my life would be forfeited.'

'Go, go!' said François eagerly, 'and I swear thou shalt want for nothing. My foster-mother is rich, and she will well provide for thee.'

'But thy foster-mother will remain here as the captive of thy enemy,' Kenneth remarked significantly.

'Ay, that I know must be the case for a time,' returned François, much agitated, 'but dost thou not see that if I am free I may be able to liberate her?'

'How so, boy?'

'I can gather to my cry a band of fearless young men who will attack my Lord of Hawksvale in his stronghold, and beat it down about his head.'

'By the Mass, but thou makest my blood thrill, for I am a fighting man, and love a fray. May perdition seize me if I am not tempted to join thee in thy venture!'

As Kenneth spoke his manner might not inaptly be described as that of a war-horse when scenting the battle from afar: it pricks its ears, its nostrils dilate, and its nerves quiver with suppressed excitement. François noticed the effect his words had produced, and taking advantage of it, he said quickly:

‘Hesitate no longer, man, and thou shalt even lead the expedition against this castle.’

‘Give me thy hand, boy,’ cried Kenneth in a voice of emotion. ‘Thine is soft and white, a dainty hand like unto a maid’s; mine is rough and strong, and hath dealt many a deadly blow in foray and fray. But it is an honest hand, and is at thy service. I’ll give thee freedom or perish in the attempt, for thy cause seemeth to me a good one. I’ll fight for thee, too, and since I know the castle, I can render thee service.’

François was almost overpowered with joy, as hope once more like an effulgent star shone bright and clear over his path. He embraced Kenneth, and murmured :

‘Thou art my good spirit. Desert me not.’

‘The saints desert me an I do,’ growled the soldier. ‘But I must quit thee now. I will make some plan for thy escape. It may not be for a night or two, but hold thyself in readiness. We must be cautious and watchful. Adieu.’

He stealthily left the cell, closing the door after him with great caution, and François stood for several minutes, his heart beating wildly and his face burning with the fire of revived energy. Then he threw himself once more on to the bed, and had soon sunk into a sound sleep.

For two long weary days after this François saw nothing of Kenneth, and he alternated between hope and fear, while the suspense became almost unendurable. In accordance with Renaud’s order, little or no food was supplied to him, but in his feverish anxiety he felt no pang of hunger, though a burning thirst consumed him.

The night of the second day was growing old, and he had almost given himself up to despair again, when noiselessly his cell door was opened, and Kenneth appeared.

‘Art thou awake?’ the man asked in a whisper.

‘Ay,’ replied François, springing to his feet with alacrity.

‘Hush!’ said the other. ‘Take this,’ and he thrust a long and formidable dirk into his hand. ‘Thou wilt know how to use it if occasion requires. Be silent as death, and follow me like my shadow.’

François adapted himself instantly to the situation, and holding his breath until he heard his heart thump, he silently followed his conductor, and in a few moments was breathing the free air. No more fitting night could have been chosen.

It was as dark as Erebus, and a misty drizzle of rain was falling. Never a sound broke the silence save the tramp of the armed watchman on the keep. Without speaking Kenneth took François's hand and led him stealthily across the courtyard, then through a narrow doorway in the wall, and so gained the outer parapet. Here Kenneth unwound from his body a long thin, but strong, cord. One end of this he made fast to a stout stick he had previously hidden there, and then throwing the cord over one of the embrasures in the wall, and placing the stick crossways against the embrasure, he whispered to François to lower himself down until he reached the glacis, fifteen feet below. This he did with great agility, and with scarcely less agility Kenneth followed. They then paused and listened, but they only heard the dismal lapping of the water in the moat and the clank of the iron-shod heels of the watchman as he paced his weary round.

'We must swim across,' Kenneth whispered. 'Divest thyself of thy clothing.'

François quickly undressed, as did Kenneth also. Then holding their clothes above their heads, they entered the water and swam across. They scrambled out on the other side, but the unavoidable noise they had made in swimming had not escaped the quick ears of the sentinel, and they had scarcely time to put on some of their garments when an alarm was given and the warder fired the cresset.* It flared up with a great burst of flame, and by its light the warder discovered the fugitives and sent a bolt from his crossbow after them; but it fell wide of its mark, and as the alarmed retainers rushed to their arms, and the whole castle was aroused, François and Kenneth sped away into the darkness of the night, and stopped not to breathe until the danger of recapture had passed.

CHAPTER LXIII.

'THY NAME IS BACON, AND THEY CALL THEE PIG.'

WE must go back a little in point of time and introduce the reader to the tavern of the Golden Cross, situated in the High

* Cressets were generally used as signals of alarm. They were iron baskets, filled with most inflammable materials, usually saturated with pitch and turpentine, and so capable of being instantly fired. They made a great flare, and threw a light for a considerable distance.

Street of Edinburgh. This tavern had gained considerable popularity; it was largely resorted to by a certain class of the citizens, and it had also become notorious for its brawls, and the deaths that had resulted from those brawls. It was, in fact, a sort of gravitating centre for adventurers of all descriptions, and its company was usually as diverse in its opinions as it was motley in its garb. To this place we will take the reader towards the close of a wet day, and when the citizens of the capital have been more than usually excited by various and alarming rumours, not the least important of them being that an attempt was to be made to seize the person of the Earl of Bothwell, then with the Queen at Borthwick Castle. The general feeling of hatred for Bothwell was so great, and had been so stirred by the fanatics of the Protestant pulpits, that public opinion was in a state of ebullition; and not only were threats and menaces general, but the most extraordinary rumours gained currency one hour, only to be contradicted the next.

The rain had driven an unusual number of people into the tavern of the Golden Cross, and the big public-room was filled with an excited and noisy crowd. This room was a large oblong chamber, with three huge fireplaces in it. The walls were whitewashed, and the stone floor was strewn with rushes. The ceiling was a massive structure of crossed oak beams, blackened with age and smoke. And suspended to these beams were dozens of boars' heads, chines of dried pork, venison hams, and smoked legs of mutton. Arranged round the room were various tables and forms, and they were nearly all occupied. At one of these tables, however, one man sat by himself. He was a man in the prime of life and had been handsome; in fact, even now his face was striking, though it unmistakably bore traces of recklessness and dissipation. He had a mass of brown curly hair, and a heavy moustache that covered his mouth. His eyes were deep set and keen as a hawk's, and his general expression was that of an easy-going, good-tempered, happy-go-lucky sort of fellow, who never troubled himself about the morrow, and whistled defiantly at care. It was difficult to tell from his dress what his station might be, but nevertheless there was something about him which seemed suggestive of the swash-buckler. A large sombrero hat, ornamented with a feather, was on the table beside him, together with a well-worn pair of gauntlet gloves

of leather. He wore a velvet jerkin that had seen much service ; it was fastened at the waist by a broad belt ; it was full at the shoulders and slashed with gray, and the skirt was cut in tabs. He had long untanned leather boots that came above the knee, the tops being lined with red and turned over. A faded purple velvet cloak was gracefully suspended from his shoulders, and his picturesque costume was completed by a rapier in a velvet scabbard. He seemed to be a stranger, and on that account was eyed suspiciously by the rest of the company. But if he was conscious of this it did not seem to affect him, for he appeared to be perfectly unconcerned, and he sipped his wine from a horn flagon with delightful nonchalance. His indifference, however, was assumed, and his quick, deep-set eyes did not lose much that was going on, while his ears were strained to catch intelligible scraps of conversation from among the babel of sounds. Presently a man rose from one of the other tables where he had been seated with a number of companions, and crossed to the table where the stranger was enjoying his wine in solitude. The new-comer was Bastian, the page and creature of Renaud, now the Earl of Hawksvale. Bastian was slightly inebriated, and he had been urged by his companions to 'pump the stranger,' with a view of finding out who he was and what his business was.

'I give thee good-day, master,' said Bastian in a pompous sort of way, as he seated himself. 'Thou art a stranger in these parts.'

'Thou art a stranger to me, and that being so it seemeth to me thou lackest manners,' returned the other pointedly.

'By the Mass, but thou art waspish !' cried Bastian.

'And by the Mass, thou art swinish,' retorted the stranger.

'Nay, man, let us not quarrel,' cried Bastian. 'Come, give me thy hand, and we'll make acquaintance.'

'Thou seemest unwashed, and therefore I should not like to touch thee,' the stranger answered, whereat there was a roar of laughter, for curiosity had been aroused, and there was a lull in the conversation in order that the dialogue between the two men might be listened to. Bastian was well known, and it was considered that he was more than a match for the stranger, and could hold his own even with sword or tongue. But there were plenty amongst the company who would not have been sorry to see Bastian worsted, for he was a bully and

a quarrelsome fellow, and generally much disliked. The sally that caused him to become a laughing-stock annoyed him much, and flashing an angry look at the other, he said :

‘Thou wouldst do well to guard thy tongue, fair sir, lest it lead thee into danger.’

‘Oh, oh, oh!’ roared the stranger in a hearty burst of laughter, ‘but thou art amusing. Now, tell me, what is thy trade? ‘Art thou a cut-throat?’

‘Thou art a beast!’ snarled Bastian savagely.

‘Nay, man; thine own eyes, being mazed with liquor, see thyself. An it please thee, I am a most worthy gentleman, and an honest one, also of exceeding great importance.’

‘Thou art a braggart.’

‘There thou art wrong again, sweet sir. I am the most modest gentleman thou hast ever known. Come, I’ll prove it to thee. Hast money in thy purse?’

‘Ay, fool, more than thou hast ever seen, judging from thy hungry looks.’

‘Thou art indeed to be envied, then. But as proving my modesty I will drink with thee. What ho! landlord. Bring us a flagon of thy best vintage. And see to it that it is thy best; for this most worthy and honourable sir will pay for it.’

Another roar of laughter greeted this, much to Bastian’s discomfiture. He seemed a little puzzled what to do, whether to openly quarrel with the stranger or pay for the liquor. He decided to do the latter, for he was a swaggerer and a boaster. And so he ordered the flagon of wine with a great deal of pomposity, and when it was brought he tossed a coin on to the table disdainfully, as though money was of no object to him.

‘Permit me,’ said the stranger, taking the flagon from Bastian, who was about to pour the wine out in a rough sort of way. ‘I see thou art not used to good wine,’ he added with a most provoking smile, ‘so, I pledge thee. Mayst thou never lack a coin to pay for a flagon of the best for thy friend. Ah! by St. Agnes, but that’s a good draught. Your tapster is a worthy man, I trow.’ Seeing that Bastian had not yet tasted his liquor, but was looking sullen and glum and was evidently enraged, he exclaimed, ‘Come, man, drink. Art thou in love? An thou art, take my advice and cut thy throat, for no woman would return thy love. Thou art too ugly. Nay, friend, feel not for thy hanger, for thou wouldst but waste thy strength. I am invulnerable.’

'Thou art the spawn of Satan!' growled Bastian, almost beside himself with rage.

'Exactly so, good friend,' returned the affable stranger with a smile, 'therefore I can boast of ancient ancestry.' "

'Thou art a noisy windbag, and for a groat I'd prick thee.'

'To it, then,' cried the stranger pleasantly, as he took a groat from his pouch and laid it on the table. Then jumping up and drawing his rapier he struck an attitude of most perfect grace and ease. 'Draw thy weapon,' he said, as Bastian hesitated, 'and if thou be not my ancestor the devil himself I'll spit thee like a woodcock.'

The stranger, who showed no signs of losing his temper, but on the contrary was the very personification of good humour and self-possession, quickly won the good feeling of the majority of those present. The company had all risen to their feet and crowded round at the prospects of a brawl, and as Bastian showed no inclination to pit himself against this audacious stranger he was greeted with jeers and taunts, until, perfectly enraged, he sprang up, drew his sword, and made a furious lunge at his antagonist. The stranger, however, never moved out of his steps, but with the most consummate skill he turned the blow aside, and by an upward twist wrenched the sword from Bastian's hand. Then picking it up, he presented it to him with a graceful bow, while a great burst of cheering greeted the act.

'I am very cunning in fence,' he said, smiling, 'and thou art but a tyro. Put thy skewer in its case lest thou shouldst do thyself an injury.'

Maddened by the sarcasm and the provoking coolness of his antagonist, and by the jeers that greeted him from the company, Bastian seized his sword savagely, and holding it at the thrust he roared:

'Who art thou, knave? and what is thy name?'

The stranger, still smiling, bowed again, but kept his rapier at guard, while his keen eyes were never taken off the face of Bastian.

'I am a barber,' he said, 'because I can bleed well, and my name is Strikehard. Now, I wager thee another flagon I can guess thy name. It's Bacon, and thou art called Pig for short.'

This sally was too much for Bastian, and he aimed a tremendous blow at the other's head. But with adroitness and

rapidity the stranger guarded himself, and the only result of the blow was a shower of sparks from the magnificently tempered blade of his rapier. As matters seemed to be getting serious, and it was certain that blood would be shed unless the two men were parted, the landlord of the tavern rushed between them, and pushing Bastian away, and not wishing to offend him, as he was a good customer, he turned to the other and said :

‘Put up thy sword, sirrah ! Thou shouldst be ashamed of thyself to assault this worthy gentleman.’

‘Nay, an it please thee, mine host, I have assaulted him not,’ returned the stranger with a little laugh, as he restored his rapier to its scabbard. ‘But he hath hot blood in him, and it were better to let some of it out.’

‘Go to ; thou art a boaster,’ said the landlord.

‘Not so, good mine host. I am a soldier, and have seen some service, and I boast not by words, but deeds. An thy friend will favour me with a game of tierce and carte, I’ll warrant to prick him three times out of every four points.’

‘Thou art insolent, sirrah,’ cried the landlord ; ‘and for aught we know thou mayest be a cut-throat, since thou seemest so well practised in arms. This worthy gentleman is Master Bastian, servant to Monsieur Renaud, physician to the Queen’s Majesty.’

‘The Earl of Hawksvale ! the Earl of Hawksvale !’ called out several of the company ironically.

‘The Earl of Hawksvale, I should have said, but Monsieur Renaud that was,’ remarked the landlord.

At the mention of Renaud’s name the face of the stranger underwent a change, and the pleasant, careless smile it had worn gave place to a frown. But he rapidly recovered his self-possession, and bowing, he said :

‘Master Bastian, I give thee greetings and crave thy pardon. I did not dream thou wert so worthy a gentleman. Come, thy hand in friendship.’

Although Bastian was not sure whether the facetious stranger was still making fun of him or not, he yielded to the entreaties of the landlord and others, and took the proffered hand, not at all sorry that the affair had ended peaceably ; for though a bully he was a coward, and really felt afraid of this redoubtable and mysterious person.

‘I forgive thee,’ he said patronizingly ; ‘but, by’r lady, thou

mayest thank mine host that I have not let daylight through thee, for thou hast a saucy tongue.'

'I am truly thankful,' returned the stranger sarcastically and again bowing; 'for, as I see, thou art a veritable fire-eater.' Then, turning to the company, he said banteringly: 'Gentlemen, you may resume your seats, for Monsieur Bastian and I will not cut each other's throats yet.'

This caused another roar of laughter, and the stranger's audacity won him many admirers. The excitement, however, being over, the company returned to the business of drinking, and the stranger and Bastian sat down together at their table, and were soon clinking their cups as if they were now sworn friends.

CHAPTER LXIV.

'FOR RIGHT AND RESCUE.'

THE flagon of wine that Bastian had ordered was soon finished, and then the stranger ordered another, and he took care that Bastian's glass did not long remain empty. The result was, that as Bastian had already been drinking pretty freely, the additional liquor told upon him, and he gave unmistakable signs of becoming stupefied.

'Come, another stoup,' said his companion, as he once more filled the glasses. 'I swear thou art a good fellow.'

'Thou hast an oily tongue,' hiccoughed Bastian; 'but thou hast not told me who thou art, nor what thy name is.'

'Pardon me, friend, I vow I am forgetful. Well, my name is Sigismond, but my friends call me the Duke of Fence.'

'The devil!' exclaimed Bastian huskily.

'No, good friend, I said not that, but the Duke of Fence.'

'A precious duke thou art,' Bastian said with a sneer.

'Thou art right, sweet sir, for I am the only one of the line,' cried the stranger with a merry laugh, and slapping the back of Bastian so lustily as to almost take his breath away.

'God's truth!' spluttered Bastian, 'though thy fist be a sledge hammer I would have thee know my back is not an anvil. I vow by the Virgin that thou hast almost deprived me of my breath. Restrain thyself, for I like not thy merriment.'

'Beshrew me, but thou art a merry dog thyself,' the stranger

said mockingly. ‘But let us be serious. I would crave thee to give me some information. I am a stranger here, and seek for knowledge. Did I understand mine host to say thou art in the service of the Queen’s Majesty?’

‘No, thou didst not, unless thou art dull of comprehension. It is my master who is in the Queen’s service, and I am my master’s servant.’

‘Ah, truly so. Thy wit is brilliant, friend Bastian. And thy master’s name is——’

‘Renaud,’ said Bastian sulkily.

‘He is a very worthy gentleman, I doubt not,’ said the stranger. ‘Whence came he? hast thou knowledge of that?’

‘Ay,’ was Bastian’s monosyllabic answer; but he seemed to be drowsy and half-stupefied, for the drink had taken hold of him.

‘What, ho, man!’ cried the stranger cheerily; ‘rouse thyself. What sayest thou to another flagon? Come, I’ll tip thee a stave.

“Fill high the flowing beaker,
And pass the bowl around;
We’ll jocund be this evening,
And make the welkin sound.
We’ll fling our cares behind us,
And live a happy hour;
We’ll pledge each friend in bumpers,
Though death upon us low’r.”

He sung these words in a soft, musical voice, arresting the attention of the company, who cried ‘Bravo!’ and urged him to proceed, so he continued:

“Come, raise your tuneful voices,
And cheerily give tongue,
And smooth away your frowns, men,
Though to-morrow you’ll be hung.
Our enemies have snared us,
And liberty hath flown;
Our bodies they have masters,
But our souls they are our own.”

‘Whence gottest thou that ditty?’ asked Bastian, inspired somewhat by the liveliness of the melody.

‘I made it.’

‘Thou made it thyself?’

'Even so, good Bastian.'

'When didst thou make it?' asked Bastian incredulously.

'When I was in Flanders, where, being taken prisoner with some comrades, we were condemned to be hung on the morrow. But our gaolers were good, and supplied us with plenty of wine, and to keep up the hearts of my comrades I made the ditty.'

'And why wast thou not hanged?'

'Because I escaped up the chimney.'

'S'death! I knew thou wert the devil,' Bastian remarked; 'and now I think of it thou smellest sulphury. But I like thee though thou didst call me pig; and I'll treat thee to another flagon of wine.' He gave the order, and when the wine was brought he poured out, with unsteady hand, two cups full, and tossed one off.

In a little while the stranger noticed that his companion was very much under the influence of drink, and so, leaning forward a little, he said:

'I hear that her Majesty the Queen has gone for better safety to Borthwick Castle.'

'Ay, and if I read the signs aright, there will be some fine throat-cutting ere long,' answered Bastian in a drivelling manner; 'and then thou wilt be able to show thy skill at thy trade.'

'Say you so?'

'I say so, and thou wilt see that I am right.'

'Is thy master with the Queen's Majesty at Borthwick?'

Bastian looked up with a drunken leer on his face, and, laughing spasmodically, he asked:

'Dost think my master is a fool?'

'No; or an he were he would not keep so excellent a gentleman as thyself in his service,' returned the stranger with withering irony, though Bastian was too muddled to see it in this light, and, actually thinking a compliment had been paid him, he grasped his companion's hand and said:

'Thou art a worthy fellow, and I love thee. But hast thou not heard my master is a great man now? They call him the Earl of Hawksvale, and, like a wise man, he hath betaken himself to his castle until the storm hath blown over.'

'Truly he is wondrous wise,' exclaimed the stranger. 'But thou hast not told me where his castle is.'

'It's many a league from here,' said Bastian drowsily. 'And

the master’s as safe there as an eagle in its nest. Nay, an he chose to defy the Queen’s Majesty herself, she could not drag him from his stronghold.’

The stranger seemed to become thoughtful and meditative, and in the meantime Bastian’s chin dropped on his breast, and he commenced to snore loudly.

The above conversation had not passed unnoticed, although the din of voices in the room was well-nigh deafening. But at the next table a group of young men were seated; and one of them, a tall, fair youth of about nineteen or twenty, had played the eavesdropper. His name was Powrie, he was an armourer’s apprentice, and those with whom he consorted were fellow-apprentices in the city.

In a little while, and imagining that he was not noticed, the stranger rose and passed out of the room. A moment after young Powrie followed him into the street, whither he had gone. It was a dismal, wretched night, and a fine rain was descending steadily, while the roughly-paved streets were like quagmires, necessitating caution and wariness in walking; for the ruts and holes were so many traps, and the miserable oil lamps, suspended on wires across the principal streets, did little more than make the darkness visible. The stranger had pulled his big sombrero hat well down over his brows, had wrapped his cloak about him, and was picking his way along as best he could, when Powrie overtook him and said:

‘Permit me, good sir, a word with you.’

The stranger stopped suddenly and flashed out his rapier, thinking the speaker was probably a footpad, with which the town abounded. But Powrie said:

‘Put up thy sword, sir. I am no cut-throat, and I have but now left the tavern.’

‘Who art thou, then, and what wouldst thou with me?’ the stranger demanded in a tone so rough that it contrasted strangely with his erstwhile pleasant and humorous manner.

‘I heard what passed between thee and Bastian,’ Powrie returned, ‘and learning thereby that thou art desirous of knowing something of one Renaud, I offer to impart to thee such knowledge as I possess. An I mistake not, thou hast strong reason for inquiring about Renaud.’

The stranger sheathed his sword, then laying his hand on the lad’s shoulder, he turned him round so that the light from a neighbouring oil lamp illumined his face.

'Thou hast a good face, boy, and an honest one withal. Who art thou?'

'My name is Powrie, and I am apprenticed to Master Scoble, the armourer.'

'Good. My name is—well, thou canst call me for the nonce Jacques, and I am a soldier of fortune. Now, say what dost thou know of Renaud?'

'Not much that is good.'

'Thou wouldst have astonished me hadst thou said to the contrary.'

'Popular opinion condemns him as one of the King's murderers.'

'And popular opinion is exceedingly likely to be right,' the stranger replied.

'You do not love him?' said Powrie.

'No; I hate him.'

'And so do I,' cried the lad warmly. 'He hath carried off my friend François, sometime page to the Queen, and supposed to be his son; but François hath told me that it is not so, and he went to the Castle of Borthwick to accuse Renaud of abducting a lady of the Court. I and my companions are sworn to rescue François; for we have a secret brotherhood or league, and are pledged to help each other. Wilt thou join us in our expedition, for since thou art a soldier thou canst render us great service?'

'Ay, by the Mass and the Holy Virgin, will I!' cried the stranger, showing some excitement, and seizing the youth's hand.

'Where are thy comrades, and when do they propose to start?'

'We have arranged nothing yet,' answered the youth.

'Have you arms?' asked the stranger.

'Ay, we have some bows and calivers, and a few pistolets; but my master, who is one of those who are sworn to bring the King's murderers to justice, will furnish us with plenty.'

'That is good,' said the stranger. 'And now, tell me, dost thou know this Renaud?'

'No; but I have heard my friend speak often of him. He hath risen to great power in the Queen's Court, and has been made an earl. Folk do say that he has mighty influence over the Queen's Majesty, and that he is a knave.'

'And where is his castle?'

'It is on the border, in Hawksvale.'

'Hast thou knowledge of it?'

‘No ; but I have heard that it is not very strong, and that Renaud hath only fifty followers.’

‘An he had six times fifty we would attack him,’ said the stranger in a jubilant tone. ‘But I must see thy comrades, and make arrangements for the raid. Where are they to be found ?’

‘If thou wilt come to-morrow night at six of the clock to the tavern we have just left thou shalt find at least two dozen there. But we must be cautious, for Bastian hath spies everywhere.’

‘Good. At six of the clock to-morrow night I will be there. Till then, adieu.’

He shook the hand of Powrie and hurried away, and the lad stood for some time looking after him and wondering who he was.

On the following night, true to his promise, the stranger was at the tavern, where thirty apprentices and some ne’er-do-weels of the town had assembled. For an adventure of the kind plenty of assistance could have been had, for there were any number of young fellows thirsting for romantic exploit. Caution, however, had to be exercised ; for, if the affair leaked out, the authorities might treat the adventurers as rioters and imprison them. Matters, however, were then in such an unsettled state, and public feeling ran so strong against the authorities, that an expedition of the kind was likely to succeed. At any rate it was certain that no assistance would be sent to Renaud, he would have to defend himself, and therefore a bold and skilfully-planned attack might result in a signal victory.

The stranger, or Jacques as he had called himself, soon gave evidence that no better leader could have been selected. Bold and daring, and the perfection of physical strength, he was well calculated to inspire young men with enthusiasm.

Little was said or done that night at the tavern, for there were too many strangers present, but an arrangement was made for a general muster on the following Saturday, in a wood about three miles from the town, when some settled plan was to be arranged. When the Saturday came they left the city in little groups and by different ways, so as not to arouse suspicion ; and instead of two dozen there were nearer eighty at the rendezvous. It was then arranged that on that day week they were to start on their expedition, and each

man was to provide himself, if possible, with a horse. Before the week had expired, however, François and Kenneth had arrived, and François's delight may be imagined when he found a little band all ready and eager to return with him. And when his comrades, with whom he was a great favourite, heard of the outrage to which he had been subjected at the hands of Renaud, they swore vengeance, and vowed to rescue Adrienne or perish in the attempt. In two days they had swelled their number to over a hundred, and they provided themselves with a large silken banner on which was worked the motto, 'For Right and Rescue.' Their mission soon leaked out, and adventurers, eager and greedy for plunder and excitement, offered their services. In fact, they might have raised a little army of a thousand strong, for the city was in a warlike mood. The nobles were mustering their forces to attack Bothwell, and rumour ran that the Queen, with a large army, was marching to meet them. Amongst those who heard of the expedition against Renaud was his henchman, Bastian, who immediately started for the south to apprise his master, thereby getting a start of two days. The little army was ready at last, and leaving the city by stealth, they met at a given rendezvous, and then under the leadership of Jacques, with Kenneth for his lieutenant, they commenced their march, nearly two hundred strong, not more than fifty of them being mounted.

CHAPTER LXV.

THE SIGN THAT BASILE SENT.

THE letter which Adrienne de Bois had written to Basile, and entrusted to Helen Macdonald for delivery, was not taken to its destination by Helen herself, but by an old man who was employed by Renaud as a woodcutter in the forests surrounding the castle.

Adrienne had a very definite object in writing that sad letter. She knew perfectly well that if ever living man had truly loved a woman, Basile loved her. For years he carried his love silently, and never by word or sign had he ventured to break down the social barrier which kept him from her. But at last, when he saw that Renaud's persecution was telling

upon her, he declared his love and proved his devotion for her. It would have been useless for her to have attempted to disguise from herself, even had she been so inclined, that Basile's was a hopeless passion. She gave him love for love, heart for heart; and whatever his faults in the past might have been, she found him a man of noble mind, with high chivalric notions, and a gentle and affectionate disposition. She was satisfied, and ready to entrust her happiness to him, and had pledged herself to become his wife. In fact, some preparations had already been made for the wedding, which would certainly have taken place in Berwick, had she not been recalled by the Queen. To respond to that call she regarded as an imperative act of loyal duty. And so the wedding was postponed, but simply because she was anxious that her Majesty should give her sanction and recognition to it. Adrienne had not the slightest doubt that that sanction would be easily obtainable, but when she returned to the Court exciting events followed each other so rapidly, and the Queen was so overwhelmed with domestic and public troubles, that Adrienne did not care to intrude her own small affairs at such a time, and so she decided to wait for a more fitting opportunity. But, alas, as is often said, delays are fatal, and in this case it was destined to prove so. Adrienne had kept up a regular correspondence with her lover, bidding him to be always hopeful and of good cheer. Then suddenly the correspondence was interrupted by her abduction; she found herself in Renaud's power, and his prisoner. But, notwithstanding this, she would have defied him to the last, and if he had slain her she would have died breathing words of love for Basile. The threatened execution of her foster-son, however, was another thing. The revelation made to her that there was no relationship at all between François and Renaud alarmed her terribly, because it showed her that Renaud had no interest in the lad, and he might, therefore, for obvious reasons, be only too glad of an excuse to put him out of his way. Under these circumstances, therefore, she could not regard his threat to kill François as an idle one. And even supposing she refused to become his wife, he would still gratify his paltry feelings of revenge by putting François to death, and yet keeping her a prisoner. For being in his power, and knowing him as she did, she had no hope of prevailing upon him to grant her release.

In viewing her position, therefore, in this light, it was no wonder she was broken-hearted, and in the extremity of her despair she resolved to sacrifice herself; that is, she would consent to marry Renaud on condition of his immediately releasing François, and this immediate release she would make an indispensable condition. But she did not give it a thought that François himself was an important factor to be taken into consideration; and it was hardly possible that he would accept his liberty on any such terms; while the possibility of his escape never once entered into her thoughts. She acted from the promptings of a sudden impulse, as most persons so situated would have done.

When Renaud next visited her she told him that she had resolved to become his wife on condition of his instantly releasing François. She might, had she been more observant, have seen by the expression of his dark face that something had happened in the interval between this visit and the last. For Renaud knew then that he was no longer in a position to comply with that condition, since the bird he thought he had caged so securely had flown. Adrienne herself had heard the commotion caused by the alarm consequent on François's escape, but when she inquired the cause of Helen Macdonald, she was informed that it was only a false alarm, as some men thought to be border raiders had been seen near the castle. The news of his prisoner's escape threw Renaud into a fever of fierce passion, and with a dozen of his followers he instantly sallied forth, and scoured the country for some little distance; but the night was too dark to enable a search to be carried on, and after two hours of useless riding about, he had to own to himself that he had been foiled, and that now his position and very life were in danger. He could not doubt for a moment that François would at once take steps to lay the truth before the Queen, and to organize some means to rescue Adrienne. Nevertheless, Renaud did not quite despair. His situation was desperate, that was true, but surely his fertile imagination and his genius for plotting would be equal to the occasion, he would find some way out of the difficulties that beset him. For years he had led a life of gross deception, and he was not likely to hesitate at still further deception now that his very life was threatened. It was hard to have to abandon so much after having just acquired what he had so long struggled for. There was no help for it. François

was his bitter enemy, that he knew, and François was at liberty; and being so, it would have been a mean intelligence that had failed to perceive that he would make most desperate efforts to pull Renaud from his exalted position.

'I have little time to act,' thought Renaud, 'but in that little time I must do much.' Then addressing Adrienne, he said: 'Thou hast come to a wise decision, and since this is a matter that it were better not to delay, we will become man and wife this very night. My spiritual adviser, Father Matthew, shall unite us.*'

'Why this haste?' exclaimed Adrienne, turning pale with a sense of fear and loathing.

'Why should there be delay?' he asked, manifesting some surprise. 'Have I not waited long enough?'

'It may be so,' she murmured, 'but it seemeth to me unseemly haste. Besides, the conditions upon which I give myself to thee have yet to be fulfilled. I must see my foster-son. I must tell him with my own lips that I am about to become thy wife. Then thou must set him free, and when he has reached Edinburgh in safety he shall send me a message that that is so. Then, and not till then, will I become thine.'

'Indeed,' exclaimed Renaud, while the cold, demon-like smile which was peculiar to him when he felt unusually savage and bitter played about his thin lips. 'Thou might at least give me credit for not being altogether a fool. When thy foster-son is safe in Edinburgh, what guarantee have I that thou wilt respect thy promise?'

'My word of honour,' she exclaimed, with strong indignation, while her eyes flashed angrily.

'Word of honour,' repeated Renaud musingly. Then to her, 'Thy word of honour, Mademoiselle Adrienne, may be a sufficient pledge under ordinary circumstances; but times are changeable, and events are taking place rapidly, so that it might happen that however willing thou mightst be to keep thy word of honour thou wouldst be prevented by, at present, unforeseen contingencies.'

'I know of nothing that is likely to prevent my fulfilling my pledge,' she said warmly. 'But thou hast my decision; accept it or not, as seemeth best. If thou wouldst have me

* It was customary for Roman Catholic lords to number a priest among their retainers.

wed with thee, send for François at once, that I may inform him with my own lips of the course I am about to take. Then thou shalt set him free, and when he is safely arrived in Edinburgh, I repeat, and he sends me word to that effect, then, and not till then, will I become thy wife.'

She had spoken rather excitedly, and with unmistakable resolution that left no room for doubt in Renaud's mind that he could not trifle with her. Her determined attitude provoked him into seething anger, but he made desperate efforts to control this, though it did not escape her notice. And she sighed with a sense of heavy despair, and even shuddered at the bare idea of becoming the wife of this man, whom she felt that she loathed and scorned. Renaud was conscious of being driven into a corner; he saw plainly that near as the realization of his wishes was, he might yet prove the axiom about there being a slip 'twixt cup and lip. But his readiness of resource, and his disregard of truth, aided him for the moment.

'I will be candid with thee,' he said. 'Thy foster-son hath escaped.'

'Escaped!' she echoed, with a loud cry of joy, and clasping her hands with thankfulness as she murmured, 'thank God!'

'Restrain thy joy,' Renaud said sneeringly. 'It is true François escaped, but my trusty scouts were soon upon his track, and I have received a message that they have recaptured him, and are bringing him back bound hand and foot.'

Adrienne covered her face with her hands and groaned despairingly.

'Ah,' said Renaud, with an expression of gloating pleasure, 'thy tone soon changes. From keen joy to bitter regret is but a breath; but thou mayst comfort thyself. Not a hair of François's head shall be injured, and his freedom is assured on condition of thou becoming my wife. Again I say that to-night must see us married.'

'And again I say No. My conditions are unalterable.'

Renaud's face was almost livid with rage at thus finding himself balked and thwarted. It seemed hard to him to be defeated in the very moment of his apparent triumph. Yet what could he do? This woman had a will and he could not break it. He might torture her mentally and physically, but if she chose to remain stubborn he would gain nothing. He

knew perfectly well he had reached a crisis in his affairs, and that delay would be fatal to all his prospects. Retirement to France promised him security, but retirement without this woman, or at any rate without her fortune, was not to be thought of, and to attempt to obtain her fortune without her he felt assured was to attempt an impossibility. Controlling himself, therefore, as best he could, he made answer to her :

‘Thou art strangely perverse, and of a doubting mind ; surely thou shouldst have trust and confidence in the man who is to be thy husband ?’

She smiled bitterly as she replied :

‘When a woman loves, or even respects a man, she should certainly have faith in him. But I do neither, and thou art aware of that. In consenting to wed thee, I am offering myself up as a living sacrifice for the sake of the boy who is dearer to me than my life. If my marriage to thee is the only means of saving him, then I will adopt those means ; and though I can never love thee, I will at least be an honourable and faithful wife to thee.’

‘That is something, at any rate,’ he said ironically, ‘and for even such a trifling mercy as that, I suppose I must be thankful. But François cannot arrive before at least two days. Become my wife to-night, and I give thee my sacred pledge that the moment he comes back I will set him free.’

‘I will accept not thy pledge,’ she said resolutely. ‘I will await François’s return.’

Renaud was foiled, and he knew it ; and unable longer to command his temper, he exclaimed passionately :

‘Thou art a fool, and, by Heaven ! I’ll teach thee a lesson in obedience. I’ll give thee twenty-four hours to reflect, and if by this time to-morrow thou hast not changed thy mind, I’ll wed thee not, but hang François like a dog as soon as he returns, and keep thee a prisoner here as long as thy life lasts, and I’ll make that life a hell to thee.’

He did not wait to hear her reply, but hurriedly left the apartment. Reply, however, she could not have made. She shuddered with horror, and felt she would go raving mad unless she could be saved from this terrible man.

An hour or two later Helen Macdonald entered, and handed her a small packet, which her messenger had brought from Berwick. With trembling hand Adrienne opened this

packet, knowing that it was from Basile. Some time previous, soon after he had confessed his love for her, she had given him a ring, which was fashioned with a heart instead of a stone. The packet contained a tiny box, on opening which she discovered the ring with the heart broken in two; and there was a scrap of paper on which, in Basile's handwriting, were the words:

'Thou hast asked me for a sign. I send it.'

She understood to some extent the meaning of this, and, weeping bitterly, she moaned:

'Poor Basile, poor Basile! I have broken his heart.'

CHAPTER LXVI.

THE REVENGING BAND.

It would not be easy to conceive a more incongruous or motley gathering, bent upon the serious business of attacking a powerful stronghold, than that which sallied forth from Edinburgh under the man Jacques, as he was pleased to call himself, and whose destination was Hawksvale, whose object was the rescue, if possible, of Adrienne de Bois, and the capture of Renaud, the Earl of Hawksvale.

Although the organization of the expedition had been conducted with great secrecy, in order to avoid official interference, its aim and object had nevertheless leaked out to some extent, and various adventurers had been attracted to Jacques's standard in the hope of plunder. The times were essentially fighting ones, and there was a large number of the population which was ever ready to embrace a cause, however desperate, that promised plunder. Torn and distracted as the kingdom was by feuds and schisms, determined men by being united might embark upon the most hazardous adventures without much fear of opposition from the ruling powers. And at this particular juncture of affairs, when the most powerful nobles in the land were marching against their lawful sovereign, whose throne and very life were threatened, predatory warfare could be carried on almost with impunity.

Jacques's little band was composed for the most part of young men, some of them, in fact, being little more than boys, though there were a few grizzled warriors whose scars bore

evidence of many a desperate fray. These men, however, were the needy loafers who loved fighting for fighting's sake, and who were ever ready to embrace any cause that held out a hope of excitement and adventure. Jacques did not object to these cut-throat rascals, because he knew that they would act as leaven on his raw recruits and keep them together. Almost every description of weapon was represented amongst this little band, each man having provided himself with what he could get, and the consequence was, there were bows and arrows, crossbows, pikes, halberds, battle-axes, slung shot, clubs, chain balls, pistols, blunderbusses, calivers, and hackbuts. Each man carried about five days' supply of food, which consisted principally of meal-cakes and dried meat. One of the mounted men, not thinking it was right that the leader of the expedition should be on foot, had given up his horse, and Jacques soon showed that he was an expert in the art of riding. His whole bearing and manner were well calculated to inspire even a less enthusiastic band than that which followed him. Good-humoured and witty, he proved, nevertheless, that he was not only a practised soldier, but could be a stern disciplinarian, and he kept his men in hand by great tact and judgment.

François, as may be readily imagined, was stirred by feverish eagerness, and urged his comrades to press forward with all speed. But many of them being unpractised walkers, and most of them having to go on foot, the rate of progress was comparatively slow; the result being that François and Kenneth were often miles ahead of their companions. Although Jacques had quickly made himself popular and had won the goodwill of his followers, he had remained a sort of mystery, and no one had been able to discover anything about him beyond the fact that he was a foreigner. But that was apparent not only by his accent, but by his general manner and bearing. To those who looked no further than the surface his bonhomie and even temper seemed never to alter. He was, to all appearances, a happy-go-lucky, careless, fig-for-tomorrow kind of fellow, who extracted from life every atom of enjoyment that was to be got, and whose disposition was so singularly happy and contented, that not even a shadow of a shade of trouble clouded his mind. But there was one who looked a little below the surface, and saw that there was a shadow, and that Jacques was disturbed by a haunting memory. It happened on the second night out, when the little band were

encamped, or rather bivouacked, in a wood, Jacques sat apart on a log of wood before the smouldering ashes of a wood-fire. François, disturbed by many conflicting thoughts concerning his foster-mother, whose fate he was anxious about, could not sleep, and had been pacing about restlessly, until at last, feeling cold, he approached the fire where Jacques was seated. The leader was peering into the glowing embers, with a far-away and dreamy expression in his eyes, and two or three times he uttered a sigh so plaintive and melancholy that François was astonished.

‘By my faith!’ exclaimed François, ‘an it were not ridiculous to suppose that thou couldst be troubled by such a thing as a heart, I would vow that thou wert in love, since thou sighest like some forlorn swain.’

Jacques half started up. He had been so absorbed and so contemplative that he had not noticed François’s approach.

‘Gad’s truth, boy!’ he exclaimed, ‘thou hast come upon me so suddenly that I swear thou hast well-nigh startled me.’ Then he broke into a laugh, which had, however, a ring of sadness in it, and he said: ‘In love, forsooth! and wherefore not? Am I not a man? But thou art wrong, sweet youth. I did but sigh for that which was. Love is no more for me. My love is dead. But, come, sit thee down and tell me something of thyself. I hear that thou art French. Thou art my countryman therefore.’

‘Ay, but I left France too young to know aught about it,’ responded François.

‘Do thy parents live there still?’

This question caused François’s cheeks to burn, and he made answer:

‘My mother is dead. God rest her soul! She was killed on the day that good Queen Mary was wedded to the Dauphin.’

‘Ah, that was a day!’ said Jacques reflectively. ‘How well I remember it; or, rather, how well I don’t remember it, for I was too much soaked with wine to remember aught. But thy father, what of him?’

‘I don’t know,’ answered François snappishly. ‘I was brought here by a man who claimed to be my father, but who is not.’

‘And who is that?’

‘The black-souled knave Renaud, when the foul fiend clutch!’

'Whom the foul fiend clutch !' echoed Jacques between his set teeth, while his eyes flashed anger-fire. 'Thou knowest much of this Renaud ?'

'Ay, . . .

'But naught that is good.'

'Good !' exclaimed François, with a little laugh. 'He is not even good enough to burn. I pray the saints that I may have the pleasure of sheathing this dagger in his false heart.' As he spoke he drew his dagger and flourished it menacingly, and made a stab at some imaginary figure in the dark.

'Put thy skewer up, boy,' said Jacques sternly. 'I have an older score than thee against Monsieur Renaud, and by the time I have wiped out mine there will not be much of Monsieur Renaud left for thee to practise upon. But thou art young yet, and may have ample opportunity to flesh thy maiden steel in a worthier carcase.'

'Who art thou, and what is thy grudge against Renaud ?' asked François in some astonishment.

'I am the devil, and Renaud has cheated me,' Jacques answered cynically.

'Nay, be serious,' said François. 'I like not thy levity at such an hour. But, come, tell me something of thyself.'

'Tut, man, I have naught to tell thee, save that I have sworn to slay Renaud ! When that is accomplished, I intend to renounce the world, and take monastic vows.'

'Thou art a mystery,' said François in a disappointed tone.

'Ay, and I fain would remain one. Go, get thee to sleep, for we will resume our march at dawn of day.'

Although François's curiosity was only stimulated by the other's reticence, he did not feel disposed to pursue his inquiries further now, for a drowsiness came over him, and so, wishing his comrade good-night, he stretched himself on the ground, rolled himself up in his cloak, and was soon asleep.

The morning broke raw and chill. A heavy dew had saturated the ground and the surrounding foliage, and all was damp and cheerless. The fires had smouldered away to heaps of white ashes ; and as the little band awoke they felt dispirited and jaded. Many of them had left comfortable homes, and this kind of roughing it, with scant food and only the wet ground for a bed, was hard to bear. For a time the enthusiasm had died out, and if anyone had had the courage to suggest a retreat, it is probable that the majority of the

shivering wretches would speedily have retraced their steps to the capital. But, with a soldier's instinct, Jacques took in the situation, and in a cheery voice he sang out :

'What ho, for Hawksvale ! By St. Nicholas, but if all be true that one hears, my Lord of Hawksvale's castle will afford us rich pickings. Pile up the faggots there and warm your chilled blood, and then southward we go.'

These words had the desired effect, and soon the hot ashes leapt into flames as sticks were cast upon them ; and then the men prepared their morning meal, and before half an hour had elapsed all were eager and cheerful again, and soon the march recommenced. François had for some time been very thoughtful. He was pondering on the conversation he had had with Jacques, until an idea suddenly struck him, and watching for an opportunity when he could speak to the leader alone, he said in an anxious tone :

'Jacques, I believe that thou art my father.'

Jacques broke out into a loud laugh, and reined in his horse that he might the better give vent to his merriment.

'Art distraught, lad,' he exclaimed, 'or hath some mischievous elf been playing tricks with thy wits during the night ? Thy father ! Alack ! no. Thou mightest have a worse sire and I a less favoured son ; but I knew not thy mother, boy, and have no kinship with thee.'

François sighed, and was sorrowful, and murmured disappointedly :

'Is it ever to be so ? Am I never to know who and what I am ?' He was very depressed, for the mystery regarding his parentage weighed upon his mind, and he could not hope now to gain any information from Renaud. In fact, so strong was his feeling of hatred for Renaud that he thirsted with a strong desire to kill him, and he had mentally resolved that if the attack on Hawksvale should prove successful he would endeavour with his own hand to revenge the years of wrong he and his foster-mother had suffered on the part of Renaud.

Inspired by Jacques's lightheartedness, the little band were soon in the best of moods, and for many hours marched along at a steady, swinging pace that rapidly brought them near their goal. But it was not until the close of the following day that they entered Hawksvale, and saw dimly and afar off the battlements of the gloomy castle, as they were defined against that part of the sky where light still lingered. François's

heart beat rapidly, and he was agitated with many hopes and fears as he turned his eyes to the castle which was Adrienne's prison. Was she still safe? he thought. Had she been spared further indignities? Would the morrow see her free?

It was decided by Jacques and Kenneth that the attack should not be delivered until towards the break of day, for there being no moon at this time, the night would be too dark to permit of operations being carried on. Jacques, therefore, instructed his followers to rest for the next two hours, and absolute silence was enjoined, while no fires were allowed to be lighted.

Later, when inky darkness had shut out everything, and nothing could be distinguished half-a-dozen yards away, the little band was once more put in motion, and stealthily in single file they crept through the forest until they were almost under the walls of the castle, where they were to remain, waiting for the first glimmering light of dawn, before making the attempt to surprise the garrison.

CHAPTER LXVII.

'LIKE A WOUNDED TIGER.'

It will be remembered that Bastian had started off from Edinburgh two days before the expedition, in order that he might warn his master, and so put him on his guard. The news threw Renaud into a perfect fever, begotten by his passion. The coolness and diplomatic caution which had hitherto characterized him seemed to have deserted him since he had acquired so much power; and the restraint which he had erstwhile been able to exercise over himself when he had sought to gain was now no longer possible, since what he had gained was at stake. For years he had struggled and intrigued to reach his present position, and now in the very moment of his fancied triumph it seemed as if all was in a fair way of being lost. Bastian's information therefore threw him into a perfect paroxysm of rage, and his first impulse was to fly in order that his life might not be jeopardized, for he was at heart a pitiable craven, and had a terrible fear of death. In all probability he would have yielded to this impulse; but what could he do with Adrienne? It would be a difficult

matter indeed to carry her to France against her will. And, besides, his object was to secure legal possession of her fortune, and that could only be done by marriage. Once again, therefore, and as a despairing effort, he repaired to the chamber, and tried to cajole, and then to coerce her by threats and fears into compliance with his wishes. But she remained steadfast and resolute, firmly refusing to become his wife until she had seen François. In fact, the persistency with which he urged her to marry him immediately, and the anxiety he displayed, served to put her on her guard, and she began to suspect that he was deceiving her about François's recapture. That her foster-son had really escaped she readily believed, because she could not for a moment imagine that Renaud would have been so mad as to have killed him, seeing that by doing so he would at once have deprived himself of the only weapon he possessed that was likely to be of any avail against her. On the other hand, if the lad had not escaped, why did Renaud not produce him? The conviction therefore grew upon her that François had got clear off, and this made her firm as a rock against Renaud's arguments. There are some men who, on finding themselves foiled when they have looked for and calculated on a triumph, become almost inhuman in their spite and rage. It was so in Renaud's case. He had come so near to realizing all his most daring schemes that it was unbearable to find himself defeated at the last moment.

Seeing that threats and persuasions were alike useless, he displayed his true character to Adrienne, for his rage and chagrin got the better of his judgment, and he revealed himself to her as a cowardly bully filled with venomous spite: in the heat of his passion striking her a cruel blow in the face.

Although she was crushed in spirit, and her heart seemed as if it were turning to lead, she felt as if she could endure all, and bear silently with any indignity so long as François was safe. Her trials and sorrows only served to bring out all the most noble qualities of her mind. And the mother's love for the boy who was not her son gave her strength to bear with the resignation of a martyr the cruelties to which she was exposed.

'I will kill you rather than let you out of my hands!' were Renaud's words, as he left her for the time being, to give his attention to putting his castle in a state to withstand an attack.

His cowardly threat, which she did not doubt would be carried out, did not alarm Adrienne. She devoutly committed

herself to the care of Heaven, and was fully prepared to meet her fate, whatever it might be.

Although Renaud felt that his castle in itself was strong enough to withstand any ordinary attack short of an actual siege, he was dismayed as he realized how few were his retainers. They numbered altogether about fifty, but not more than thirty of them were really fighting men. He was reassured, however, when Bastian told him that his enemies were an undisciplined 'band of boys,' quite incapable of any serious effort at warfare.

'Then we'll teach them a lesson that they will long remember,' he said boastfully. 'It were more fitting, perhaps, that instead of bringing our weapons to bear against them we sallied forth with canes and whipped them. But a little blood-letting will do them no harm, it may be, and may save us from similar annoyances in the future.' He said this banteringly, though he could scarcely have helped a feeling that, after all, it was a sorry joke, because he knew perfectly well that François would be the moving spirit of the party, and young though he was, he had a lion's courage and all the qualities of a soldier. Moreover, was not his mission the rescuing of his foster-mother? and that purpose in itself would inspire his followers with enthusiasm and daring. 'Bastian,' he said, as he thought over this—'Bastian, thou hast ever been a devoted and faithful follower of mine, and thy interests are now inseparably bound up with my own. Thou couldst now put the crowning act upon thy devotion by rendering me a service which would be so great as to be almost beyond price!'

'What is it, master?' asked the creature. 'An I can do it, thou hast but to command!'

'Place in my power again the youth François, and thou shalt name thine own reward,' said Renaud.

'That may not be so easy,' Bastian answered thoughtfully.

'In thy youth thou wast a soldier,' pursued Renaud, as a new hope dawned within him. 'Surely thou hast not lost thy cunning in the use of arms, and art yet capable of making a bold dash!'

'What wouldst thou propose then?' Bastian asked with curiosity.

'I would propose that when these untrained boys, who, thou hast informed me, are marching against my castle, come in sight, thou shouldst sally forth with half a dozen or so of

picked fighting men, and cutting thy way, regardless of cost, to François, seize him from the very midst of his rabble, and deliver him once more into my hands.'

Bastian was silent for a few minutes. He was turning the matter over in his mind. Bad as he was, he was not lacking in courage of a certain kind, and the adventure proposed recommended itself to him. But, although he had underrated the enemy to his master, he did not doubt that François would be well supported. He was anxious, however, to serve his master, not from any desire for gain—for strangely enough he was not mercenary, but he had a dog's fidelity, and base as his nature was, he was faithful in his attachment.

'I will attempt it,' he said at last.

'Say thou wilt accomplish it,' Renaud remarked joyfully.

'I cannot accomplish the impossible,' Bastian returned; 'but if it is to be done thou mayst rely on my doing it.'

Renaud's hopes rose rapidly; he seized and shook his creature's hand with delight, and embraced him in accordance with the custom of his country. This man might yet save him, he thought; and if he could succeed in once more getting François into his keeping, his dearest wishes might be realized. He was elated with the new hope, and exceedingly sanguine that the hope would become fruition. Nevertheless, he neglected no precaution, for though he could not bring himself to believe it possible that François could have any considerable gathering, he was determined to be on his guard. One of his precautions was the sending out at dusk of some of his men as scouts, whose instructions were to bring in word immediately the enemy was sighted. It thus chanced that one night these scouts returned post-haste with the information that the enemy had entered the vale, and were stealthily creeping up to the castle. Beyond this bare fact the scouts could say nothing as to the numbers or composition of the attacking force, though they expressed a belief that there were not many. Renaud smiled as he heard this, and rubbing his hands gleefully, he murmured, 'There may not be many now, but there will be fewer in a little while. It is not my fate to be destroyed by a puny rabble of beardless boys.'

All through the dreary hours of darkness a sleepless vigilance was kept in the castle. Renaud himself slept not, but kept moving about throughout the night. A little while before the day broke, Bastian, at the head of half a dozen men, all armed

to the teeth, left the castle by the sally-port to endeavour to seize François.

‘Fail not!’ said Renaud, as he watched his creature depart.

‘In less than three hours François shall be within these walls,’ Bastian answered boastfully; ‘or call me no more thy servant,’ he added, as he disappeared in the darkness.

In the meantime Jacques and his followers had taken up their position within bow-shot of the castle walls, where they prepared to wait until daylight should enable them to deliver their attack. They were cold, weary, and hungry; but they posted their guards, and observing a solemn silence, threw themselves down on the wet ground, in the hope of obtaining a brief rest. But Jacques himself was watchful, and on the alert, as became a commander; and so it happened that when the night was well-nigh spent, and one of the guards ran in exclaiming, ‘Master Jacques, there are men approaching, or rate me a fool!’ the warning was sufficient for Jacques. He instantly aroused all his little band, and bade them be prepared. Then he went forward himself to reconnoitre, and speedily discovered that the approaching strangers were few in number. Returning hastily, he disposed his followers with soldierly skill; dividing them into groups, but within touch of each other, and giving them orders to let the oncomers get into their midst, when they were to surround them and cut them down if they showed resistance.

All unconscious that his presence had been discovered, Bastian marched forward a little ahead of his companions, who followed in single file, until suddenly they heard a cry of command, then a rush of many feet, and they found themselves battling furiously with an unseen enemy.

‘Hold together and strike hard!’ exclaimed Bastian, as a rallying cry; but he soon discovered that he had fallen into an ambuscade, and being somewhat in advance of his followers, he was surrounded, while a blow from a hackbut brought him to the ground. It is certain that he would have been despatched there and then, but it happened that Jacques was by, and not knowing who the prostrate man was, he exclaimed:

‘Hold your hands, comrades, and secure that foe; he may be able to give us information.’

This timely interference saved Bastian’s life. He was grievously wounded and helpless; but his limbs were tied with cords, and he was lashed to the trunk of a tree, where,

writhing with pain, and chafing like a caged wild beast, he cursed his ill luck, and called himself a fool for having run into such a trap.

Daylight at last crept up the eastern sky, and a sullen day broke. The sky was overcast, the surrounding hills were wrapped in gray mist, and a nipping wind swept down the valley. Of the six men who had accompanied Bastian two were slain, but the others had effected their escape in the darkness, and had no doubt returned to the castle. The victory, however, had not been won without cost, and five of Jacques's followers had bitten the dust. On going to where his prisoner was, in order that he might interrogate him, Jacques was surprised to recognise Bastian.

'What ho! friend,' he cried, with a laugh. 'I give thee greeting. But how is it I find thee in such a plight? By the Mass, but thou hast the look of one who has o'erdrunk himself. Now, I dare be sworn thou wert not abed last night. Truly, sweet friend, thou must mend thy ways an thou wouldst live long.'

Bastian groaned with impotent rage at being thus taunted, and with a defiant expression in his bloodless face, he hissed out :

'A curse upon thee, devil! An I were free I would teach thee how to respect thy betters.'

'Thy language is not choice,' answered Jacques ironically. 'But the night's dissipation has ruffled thy temper. Control thyself, good friend, and make thyself agreeable. Come, now, tell me, is thy honourable master prepared for our visit? By the Mass, but we are a-hungred, and are impatient to sit within his hall. I'll warrant me that we do justice to his venison and his wine.'

Bastian growled like a wounded tiger that was being teased, and he answered savagely :

'Thou wilt find, 'ere thou hast grown another hour older, that the spirit of bragging will have been taken out of thee. Nay, if thou wilt but cut these cursed ropes and give me a weapon, I'll pound thee into jelly, and hang thy boasting tongue on a tree for hawks to peck at.'

'Now art thou too kind,' said Jacques sarcastically; 'and much do I regret me that want of time will not permit me to gratify thy very reasonable desires. I have business with thy master, and until that is settled I shall have to deprive

myself of thy most excellent company. But thou shalt be well cared for in my absence, and shouldst thou find thy life unbearable my men shall relieve thee of thy burden. Nay, man, scowl not nor look so fiercely. Thou art in delicate health, and it were better that thou shouldst compose thyself; for truly, an thou wert to die, thy place could not be filled.'

Bastian fairly foamed as his enemy thus mocked him, and wounded and weak as he was he made a desperate effort to burst his bonds, but the effort was fruitless, and he leaned back against the tree with a groan of pain, while Jacques hurried away to form his men ready for the attack, which began by a flight of arrows that were directed against the soldiers who were visible on the battlements of the castle.

CHAPTER LXVIII.

THE MYSTERIOUS JACQUES.

THERE was consternation in the castle of Hawksvale when the four men who had escaped from the fury of Jacques's followers rushed back with the news that they had fallen into an ambuscade; that two of their number and Bastian were slain, and they themselves had only escaped with great difficulty. As it was, one of them was seriously wounded, and another slightly so; and they all bore the signs of having been engaged in a desperate fray. They had evidently conceived an exaggerated notion of the enemy's numbers, for they stated that an immense army was closing up round the castle.

Renaud heard the news with dumb amazement and a sense of shrinking fear. With Bastian dead, one of his pillars of strength had gone, he thought, and for himself it must be a deadly struggle for dear life. Could it be possible that after all his great striving his hopes were to be shattered, his possessions crumbled into the dust, and he, even if he escaped with his life, driven forth as a beggared fugitive?

In that hour of his darkness and mortal fear the thought came to him, not knowing that his enemy was already in flight himself, that this was the work of the Earl of Bothwell, and as he so thought he found tongue to utter imprecations on Bothwell's head. But this very thought served

to unnerve him, for to let Bothwell triumph were a bitterness almost worse than death. And so with the energy of utter desperation he applied himself to the defence of his stronghold. His men were few, but even those few, if resolute, might defy an army, for the castle was powerful, and being so near the frontier was always in a state of preparedness against sudden attack. The moat was deep and full of water, and now the drawbridge was drawn up and the massive portcullis was lowered, so that a formidable, if not an impassable, barrier was thus imposed to the attacking force.

As Renaud strained his eyes in search of his foes he saw forms issue like phantoms from the enshrouding mists, and then a flight of arrows whistled through the air, and two of them found their billets in the bodies of two of his fighting men, one of whom, being pierced through the brain, fell instantly dead, while the other was disabled. Renaud beheld this with dismay, for to lose two of his men, when their number was so few, was a disaster.

‘Return that with interest,’ he cried hoarsely, and answering to his cry his archers shot their arrows, and he himself seized a crossbow, and sped a formidable bolt into the advancing column. Then his thoughts flew to his wretched and unhappy captive, Adrienne de Bois. And with the meanness that was such a conspicuous trait in his composition, he resolved that she should have no chance of escape. He knew well that François’s aim and object were to rescue Adrienne, that strenuous efforts would be made to effect an entrance into the castle, and if once that were done all would be lost. ‘But even in his moment of triumph,’ Renaud thought, ‘I will defeat him, and Adrienne shall die.’

He repaired at once to her chamber and entered without any ceremony. She had not yet risen, nor had she been even disturbed, for from the position of the room she heard nothing of the commotion the attack had caused. Renaud’s rude and abrupt entrance startled her into full wakefulness, and with a cry of alarm she demanded to know how he dared to intrude upon her privacy in such a manner.

‘Rise from thy bed,’ he exclaimed savagely. ‘The castle is attacked, and I would place thee in safety.’

Adrienne’s heart leapt into her mouth, with mingled fear and hope—fear lest this coward should kill her in spiteful anger, and hope that the castle might fall and she be released.

'I rise not until thou hast retired,' she answered with dignity. 'I may be thy captive, but at least I am not thy slave.'

'There is no time to bandy words, and none for ceremony,' he cried. 'Do as I bid thee, or by the Mass thy stubbornness may excite me to strangle thee where thou liest.'

Poor Adrienne trembled with terrible fear as the ruffian thus threatened her; but still her wounded dignity and sense of self-respect gave her strength to answer him.

'If thou art not entirely lost to every sense of chivalry and to manly consideration for the weakness of my sex, thou wilt leave me,' she said firmly and yet pleadingly. But he was in no mood to listen to pleadings, and certainly not to show pity. He was exasperated, and moved by a desire to give vent to his feelings by cruelty. He glared at her with malicious anger as he replied:

'Thou hast always thwarted me, always defied me. But know this, the castle is surrounded, should my enemy triumph it will be the signal for thy death.'

'What wouldst thou with me?' she gasped with almost palsied lips, as she inferred from his tone and manner that he intended to kill her.

'I would place thee where none other can find thee, and where I can slay thee as soon as the first of the enemy scales the walls, for all my time has come I swear thou shalt not out-live me.'

His terrible threats and fierce bearing deprived her of her strength, for her heart seemed to stand still as a sense of blank despair came upon her, and burying her face in her hands, she moaned in agony. This only seemed to increase Renaud's fury, and to exhaust any little stock of patience he had remaining, so that he strode fiercely across the room, and seizing her, he lifted her like a child, and then, in spite of her screams and struggles, he carried her along the stone passages, and descending a secret flight of steps he reached a subterranean passage. At the end of this passage was a dungeon,* which was situated below the castle keep. By this time the unfortunate Adrienne had swooned, so that he bore her along with less difficulty. He had provided himself with the key, and opening the door, he carried her into the dungeon, which

*The reader need scarcely be reminded that all strongholds at this period were provided with dungeons or prisons, which were frequently the scenes of unutterable human suffering.

was pitch dark and smelt like a tomb ; and in truth it was little better than a tomb, for by a diabolical arrangement a trap-door in the wall could be opened by a lever worked from above. The opening of this door gave access to the waters of the moat, so that the wretched victim could be drowned like a caged rat. Renaud was excited and almost beside himself with rage, and without one pitying thought for the poor lady whom he was treating with such barbarity, he placed her, insensible as she was, on the damp earth floor, and closing the door behind him he hurried away. In a few minutes, however, he seemed to relent, and seeking out Helen Macdonald, he bade her descend to Adrienne's assistance, and to take coverings, restoratives and a light. He then went out to see what progress the fight was making.

The attacking force had not gained any advantage, while the defenders were presenting a very bold front, though Renaud learned with dismay that three more of their number had been slain ; but the resolution and the desperate boldness of the besiegers showed that they were not to be easily beaten off.

As Renaud peered over the battlements he beheld François, and knowing that if he could but succeed in taking him alive he would win his cause, he cried to his men :

‘A thousand crowns for him who seizes that youth and brings him in alive ! What ho ! captain of the guard, concentrate thy strength at the castle gate for its defence. Lower the drawbridge, and with a dozen of thy best men make a bold dash into the enemy's midst and bring me back that boy, and a thousand crowns are thine.’

The captain looked at his chief in perfect amazement, knowing how mad-brained was the order, for to lower the bridge was to give the enemy a way to enter. He attempted to remonstrate, but Renaud, knowing how desperate was his case, felt that some desperate remedy must be tried ; and the very daring of the deed he proposed might, if done with a brilliant dash, be successful. Therefore, he would not listen to remonstrance, but sternly ordered the captain to obey his command. The man was a soldier, fighting was his trade, and though he recognised the danger of the undertaking, he merely shrugged his shoulders, and then, calling his men together, gave them their instructions.

When all was ready the portcullis was raised, the drawbridge

was lowered, and the captain, followed by a dozen men, rushed across to where François was directing the movements of a body of archers. Nothing that Renaud could have devised could have so thoroughly defeated his own plans and played into his enemy's hands. Had his garrison been a powerful one the move might have had some chance of success, but it was too weak to prevail against a determined onslaught; though even had it been otherwise, the step would have been a risky one when such a leader as Jacques was in command. Most ably seconded by Kenneth, he proved himself to be a master of strategy, and seemed to be ubiquitous, while by his daring and skill he inspired his followers to deeds of valour. Determined at any cost to effect an entrance into the castle, and knowing from Kenneth's statement how small the garrison was, he had, by Kenneth's advice, collected some of his men who were to swim the moat, and, by means of rough scaling ladders they had extemporised, to scale the walls. But while this plan was being discussed they saw with astonishment the drawbridge lowered, and the defenders rush across it. With the quickness of soldierly instinct Jacques guessed that this bold move was meant to strike terror, and gain an advantage by a sudden blow; notwithstanding that, he considered it a mad act. Warning François and his party by a cry, Jacques quickly had his men in hand, and, moving at precisely the right moment, he swooped down so as to cut off the retreat of those who had come out, and in a few minutes he had won the bridge. An attempt was made to drop the portcullis, but one of the chains got foul, and before it could be cleared Jacques and his bold followers had sprung forward and were engaged in deadly strife beneath the archway.

Although the attackers outnumbered the defenders, it seemed doubtful for some time which side would score the victory. But others of Jacques's followers had rushed upon the bridge to their leader's assistance, and soon the defenders were forced back inch by inch until the courtyard was gained. But here, encouraged by Renaud, they made a despairing stand, and a fierce combat ensued. The captain of the guard, however, had been shot dead by an arrow almost as soon as he got across the bridge, and his men, becoming demoralized, were easily defeated. Thus the bold movement had disastrously failed, and had absolutely been the means of placing the castle in the hands of the enemy, who now swarmed in to the assist-

ance of their leader. The struggle was very unequal, and the resistance ceased by reason of most of the defenders being slain or overpowered.

Jacques had not won his victory without loss ; many of his men were prone on the earth, and would never of their own accord rise again. François had fortunately remained scathless during the *mêlée*, although he had not hesitated to bear his share of the full brunt of the battle. He had singled out Renaud, who, blanched by despair and fear to the hue of a corpse, fought with mad desperation ; but so unskillfully that he did little more than save himself from being cut down. At last, however, his strength failed him, and François sprang forward with the intention of running him through the body, but at that instant the sword was struck out of his hand, and someone in a voice of thunder cried :

‘Hold ! spare that man !’ and to François’s astonishment Jacques threw himself between him and his intended victim. François was literally dumfounded. He stood for some moments staring in speechless wonderment at the man who had thus balked him of his prey. At last he was enabled to give expression to his feelings, and, snatching up his sword, he exclaimed :

‘Wherefore, Jacques, dost thou interpose between me and the man who for years has inflicted wrong and injury upon me ? For this moment I have panted, in this moment I would take the full measure of my revenge, but thou of all men would shield the impostor from my just vengeance. Stand aside, I say, and let me have at him ! I have cruel blows and bitter persecution to wipe out—persecution of myself and of my beloved foster-mother. Stand aside, I say, while I cut the wretch down !’

He stepped forward and raised his sword ; but Jacques, with a fierce gesture, thrust him aside with such force that he reeled, and only saved himself from falling by great dexterity. Jacques’s whole manner had changed. He was no longer the pleasant-looking man, full of good humour and geniality. There was a passionate expression amounting almost to ferocity in his face, and his bearing and wrath suggested danger that it were folly to tempt.

‘I have already spoken,’ he hissed hoarsely. ‘And at thy peril strike this man. Nay, an thou dost so much as injure a hair of his head, I’ll hack thee to mince meat.’

If François was amazed, it may readily be imagined what Renaud's feelings were in thus finding a saviour in his hour of mortal peril. Fear and exhaustion had deprived him of strength. Pale to ghastliness, his eyes prominent through terror, his nostrils pinched, and his mouth drawn, he was like a living corpse. His conscience must have smitten him sorely in that supreme moment, to have caused such craven shrinking. He, who had inflicted pain and wrong for years, was a palsied coward now that pain and death stared him in the face. Cowering close to his protector, whose arm he seized, he whined out piteously and in trembling accents :

‘I know not who thou art, but I thank thee for thy interference. Thou art a true knight, since thou hast interposed to save an unfortunate man from the violence of an ingrate. I have been a true and good friend to that youth, but he has ever repaid my services with rebellious and wicked conduct. Now he has headed a rabble to invade my residence and destroy my property. I am a peaceful citizen, unused to the arts of war, and my only desire is to live at peace with all men. I pray you, good gentleman, therefore, protect me. Rid me of these ruffians and place that ungrateful youth in my keeping, and I vow by the blessed Virgin that half my fortune shall be thine.’

As François heard the whinings of the lying hypocrite, his blood fairly boiled, and he made a desperate lunge at the cringing coward ; but with marvellous quickness Jacques warded off the blow, and again dashed him back and roared in stentorian tones :

‘By Heaven, an thou dost not obey me, I’ll cleave thee in twain ! Thou shalt only reach this man over my dead body.’

François was furious at being thus foiled by the very man upon whose assistance he depended, and whom he deemed his friend. He did not attempt to reason with himself as to the cause which had so suddenly changed Jacques. But smarting under a sense of wrong, and inwardly writhing at thus being baffled, he raised the rallying cry of ‘For right and rescue !’ and as half a dozen of his friends rushed forward he exclaimed : ‘What ho ! a traitor there ! Jacques is a traitor to us. Cut him down—cut him down !’ Then he made a fierce onslaught on his antagonist, aided by his friends, and Jacques thus found himself battling for his life. For a few moments he did nothing more than parry with wondrous skill the furious blows

that were aimed at him. Almost paralyzed with fear, Renaud crouched behind him. Jacques knew perfectly well that he could not long maintain such an unequal struggle, but strangely enough, he had not yet aimed a single blow, though it is certain that his marvellous skill and strength of wrist would have enabled him to cut down some at least of his foemen. Now addressing himself to François, he cried :

‘Madman! why art thou wasting thy strength and substance with this impotent rage? Thou camest here to save thy foster-mother. Yet hast thou already forgotten her. Shame on thee! Thou art an ingrate indeed.’

These words had a magical effect on François; he seemed ashamed of himself. Truly, in his passion he had forgotten Adrienne, and his conscience smote him.

‘Leave him! leave him!’ he called out to his friends. ‘There is a lady in distress. To the rescue of Adrienne de Bois!’ Seizing this opportunity, Jacques turned to the trembling Renaud and said :

‘Quick, an thou wouldst save thyself, lead the way to thy private chamber.’

Renaud needed no second bidding, but, like a startled animal, he turned and fled, followed by Jacques. He entered the castle, darted along the corridor, and mounting a flight of steps, sped down another passage, and dashed into a large room, followed closely by Jacques.

‘Are we safe from intrusion here?’ Jacques asked.

‘Ay, ay,’ gasped Renaud, as he sank into a chair exhausted. ‘The door is massive; close it, and shoot the bolts.’

Jacques swung the heavy door on its hinges, and then shot the ponderous iron bolts into their sockets. The room had evidently been built with a view to its being a refuge in time of danger. He glanced round, and noticed that arms of various descriptions hung upon the walls. At one end was a long window, guarded by iron bars. But his keen eyes also noted that these bars were made to swing aside so as to admit of egress by the window, which he guessed at once was meant as a means of escape if the occupant of the room were hard pressed.

‘Where does that window lead to?’ he asked.

‘On to a terrace,’ Renaud answered. ‘From the terrace, by means of a trap-door, a subterranean passage can be gained which will give us safe exit from the castle.’

Jacques smiled, but it was a smile full of scorn, and of deep, designing meaning ; and he muttered between his teeth, and with smothered fierceness :

‘So the hour has come at last !’

CHAPTER LXIX.

THE MISSION OF JACQUES, AND HOW IT WAS CARRIED OUT.

For some moments nothing further was said by either Renaud or Jacques. The former seemed overcome by exhaustion, and the latter apparently was examining the room. Then Renaud spoke. He said :

‘I owe thee grateful thanks ; and thou shalt find that not alone in words can I repay. Thou hast saved my life, and thy reward shall be commensurate with that great service. But tell me, good friend, who art thou, and wherefore hast thou displayed so much kindness towards one who is an utter stranger to thee ? Truly the world is filled with Samaritans of whom we reck but little.’

‘I have not rendered thee this service without a motive,’ answered Jacques, as his lips curled in contemptuous scorn.

Perhaps there was something in Jacques’s tone or manner which caused the other surprise or alarm ; for arousing a little from his lethargic condition, he exclaimed quickly :

‘Ah, say you so ! And what is thy motive, good friend ?’

‘Thou art a Frenchman,’ Jacques observed, without answering the question. From this Renaud was reassured, and replied :

‘Ay, and so art thou. I hail thee welcome as a country-man.’

‘We will see later on,’ said Jacques mysteriously. ‘Thy name is Renaud, is it not ?’

‘I am the Earl of Hawksvale,’ Renaud answered scornfully and arrogantly, and seeming in that moment to forget his indebtedness and his exhaustion alike.

‘Thou art still Renaud, no matter how thou mayst gild thyself over.’

‘Well, what wouldst thou with me ?’ asked Renaud with some warmth, for his vanity had been wounded.

‘Being Renaud, I have something to tell thee,’ Jacques

said pointedly, and fixing his keen eyes on the other man's face.

'To tell me?' Renaud exclaimed in great surprise.

'Ay, to tell thee.'

'How so? Who art thou? and whence comest thou?' Renaud asked this not without some anxiety, and he glanced nervously round, as something in his companion's face caused a feeling of alarm to come over him.

'I come from France—from Paris,' was the answer. 'As to who I am, thou shalt learn anon.' He paused for a moment or two, then with great abruptness said: 'Thou hast left a wife in France.'

The remark had the effect that a stinging blow might have had on Renaud. He fairly jumped in his seat, and grasping the arms of his chair nervously, as his white face grew whiter, he exclaimed with trembling voice:

''Tis false!'

'Where didst thou leave her, then?' asked Jacques ironically.

'I left her nowhere, since I had no wife to leave.'

'Then the woman who called herself Marie Jael had no claim upon thee?'

Renaud's self-possession returned as this question suggested immediately to him that the man before him had some knowledge of Marie, and trading on that knowledge, had come to extort hush money from him.

'Didst thou know Marie Jael?' he asked.

'Thou needest have no fear of Marie Jael herself,' answered Jacques prevaricatingly, 'unless the spirits of the dead can haunt the living.'

'She is dead, then,' cried Renaud, with a great sigh of relief.

'Ay,' was the monosyllabic answer, but uttered in a tone of smothered fierceness.

'God rest her soul then!' cried Renaud, with a mock expression of sorrow.

'Amen to that,' returned Jacques sincerely. 'It is to tell thee something of Marie Jael that I am here.'

All fear had for the moment passed from Renaud's mind. The information of his wife's death was welcome news to him, and he did not make the slightest attempt to conceal the true workings of his mind. During all the years that had passed

since that day when he deserted her, he had been tormented with a fear that she would ultimately follow him, for he knew that she was iron-willed when thwarted, and madly passionate when aroused by jealousy. This fear, however, had gradually diminished as the years went on, until latterly he had come to the conclusion that she must be dead, or she would never have remained quiet so long. Now suddenly and unexpectedly he had received confirmation of his thought, and he accordingly rejoiced.

‘What is it thou hast to tell me?’ he asked, quite jauntily, and rallying from the depression and fear that had a little while ago affected him.

‘It will be within thy memory, maybe,’ said Jacques, ‘notwithstanding all that thou hast crowded into it since then, that thou left thy wife in the care of thy erstwhile friend, one Reibell.’

‘True, true,’ answered Renaud quickly. ‘And he is dead, too?’

‘Yes.’

‘Poor devil!’ exclaimed Renaud with a little laugh.

‘The Reibell thou knewest in thy youth is dead, but the new Reibell lives,’ answered Jacques pointedly and enigmatically.

‘She was false to me, then?’ cried Renaud, as another idea struck him, namely, that she had borne a son to Reibell.

The remark caused a scowl of passion and hatred to come into Jacques’s face, and striking the table heavily with his clenched fist, he exclaimed:

‘Hast thou no shame? Or did shame and thee part company when thou became an earl?’

Renaud appeared to lose some of his self-confidence at the other’s fierceness, and he wore the look of a man who was evidently puzzled, if not altogether alarmed.

‘Thy remark made my question a natural one,’ he observed, as trying to palliate himself.

‘But an thy thought had been justified, thou wouldst still have had cause to blush, seeing that thou deserted her and left her in the hands of an adventurer.’

‘Truly he was an adventurer and a knave,’ Renaud observed thoughtfully.

‘And yet he was an honest man than thou,’ said Jacques

scornfully ; ' for he respected his trust and was faithful to the unhappy lady.'

' Truly then he was a marvel,' sneered Renaud sarcastically.

' He was a man who, beneath his rough exterior, hid something of the knight's chivalry.'

' In very truth, he was a prodigy,' said Renaud mockingly.

Then, suddenly changing his manner, and displaying anxiety and fear, he asked quickly, as he peered into Jacques's face :

' Who art thou ?'

' *Reibell* !' was the answer.

Renaud showed signs of trepidation, but quickly recovering himself, and summoning effrontery, of which he had an unlimited supply, to his aid, he exclaimed as he sprang to his feet and stretched forth his hand :

' As the flowers that come after winter snows are welcome, so art thou welcome, old friend. Thy hand.'

Jacques, or Reibell, drew back a little, and said with emphasis that slightly startled his listener :

' Thou mayst have cause to change thy opinion before long.'

' How so ?' asked the other breathlessly.

' Resume thy seat and listen. I am the bearer of a message from her to thee.'

' But she is dead,' Renaud gasped.

' Ay ; dead these four years.'

' Good,' remarked Renaud, as he dropped into his seat with a chuckle of self-congratulation. ' The dead can tell no tales, and are not to be feared.'

' The dead can strike through the living,' said Reibell fiercely.

Renaud looked amazed and frightened, and starting forward in his chair, he asked, in a tone that betrayed his nervousness :

' Comest thou here as my friend or foe ?'

' As thy foe—thy deadly and uncompromising foe,' was the stern answer.

Renaud sprang to his feet once more, and instinctively his hand clutched the dagger that was suspended from his belt.

' Since thou declarest thyself so openly my foe, it were well to be on my guard,' he said.

' As thou wilt,' answered the other coolly ; ' but thou hadst best listen to what I have to tell.'

' Be quick in thy telling, then, for time presses,' Renaud

replied with his old arrogance. 'I am not unmindful that thou hast saved my life, and I owe thee something for that. But still I am not disposed to let thee trifle with my temper and my patience.'

'Try and stretch thy patience out a little longer, my Lord of Hawksvale,' said Reibell with cutting irony. 'By-and-by thou wilt wish that my story had no end.'

'I will vote thee tedious an thou dost not proceed,' Renaud remarked, all his fear leaving him, as he thought that it was simply a case of money payment which he would have to make.

'I told thee just now that the old Reibell was dead, but the new one lived,' Reibell went on. 'That is true, for the Reibell thou left in Paris is not the Reibell thou seest before thee.'

'Thou wert good-looking, but art no longer so,' said Renaud, with a sorry attempt at humour. 'Thou hast dissipation in thy face, and hast evidently outrun thy years, for thou art older than thou shouldst be, dear friend.'

'My youth is buried,' answered Reibell.

'It is dead, that is certain,' remarked Renaud caustically. 'But where didst thou bury it, good Reibell?'

'With my heart, and that is in the grave of Marie Jael.'

This unexpected answer, and the tone in which it was said, changed Renaud's manner; and though he tried to conceal the concern he felt, it was very apparent in the tone in which he remarked:

'Marie Jael was my wife, and yet thou unblushingly confessest to having loved her.'

'Traitor and false knave!' exclaimed Reibell, displaying passion for the first time. 'It is no shame for me to confess that I loved *her* whom thou abandoned, but my love was honest and pure.'

Renaud was frightened at this outburst and the fierceness of Reibell's manner, but he made desperate efforts to hide his fear, and said sneeringly:

'Thou art truly a marvel of virtue; and rest assured an thou findest not thy reward in this wicked world, heaven will give it to thee.'

'Fool, reserve thy taunts, lest they recoil on thine own head!' cried Reibell sternly. 'When thou didst so shamefully betray Marie Jael, and made me thy wretched tool for

deceiving her, I knew nothing of her; but when I came to know, I also came to wonder how thou couldst have deceived so angelic a woman.'

'Well, well,' said Renaud uneasily, as the speaker paused, 'what is the sequel of all this?'

'When I learnt her worth, I learnt to love her,' Reibell went on.

'And of course she returned thy love?' observed Renaud dryly.

'She *did* return my love, thinking that thou wert dead, and she would have given herself to me, but *I could not deceive her.*'

'I repeat, thou art truly a marvel,' said Renaud with cutting irony.

'Reserve thy sneers,' cried Reibell, with a sudden outburst of passion, 'or, by Heaven, I'll strangle thee in thy insolence!'

Renaud quailed and shrank within himself, so to speak, for he was an arrant craven, and his heart was filled with fear. He glanced nervously towards the door, but the heavy bars and bolts firmly resting in their sockets convinced him that escape by that means was impossible. Then he turned his eyes towards the window, and as Reibell noticed this, he said:

'Thou art anxious to depart. If thou shouldst leave by the doorway, thou wouldst fall into the hands of thine enemies without, whose cries reach us even here as they sack thy castle. Thou hast said that that window gives access to a subterranean passage. By that means, then, thou mayest gain thy liberty.'

'Let us depart then at once,' said Renaud, with nervous eagerness.

'There is a condition attached to thy escape,' Reibell remarked pointedly.

'What is it? Name it quickly.'

'In good time thou shalt know it. I have not yet finished my story.'

Renaud made a gesture of impatience, but the other, heeding him not, went on:

'I have said that I came to love Marie Jacl, and she returned that love. But her beauty and her goodness were her armour; and though I worshipped her, though the very ground she pressed with her foot was precious to me, I could not deceive her. I tore myself from her on the plea that urgent matters called me abroad. I went to the wars; I

fought in Flanders and tried to fling my life away. But death passed me by. I was taken prisoner at last and condemned to be hung. Then came upon me an unutterable longing to see Marie Jael once more. Death I feared not, but I could not die until I had seen her again.'

He paused, for a deep feeling of emotion had overcome him.

'And didst thou see her?' asked Renaud impatiently.

'Ay; I killed my gaoler and escaped. I fled to Paris, but it was to find Marie Jael dangerously ill. Her father had long been dead; most of her relations were dead, and she was all but alone. Tenderly I watched over her, and tried to woo her back to life. Ah! how I hung upon her very breath, watching its flickerings, and cursing the fate that kept her from me. She began to grow stronger, and one day said: "Reibell, now that thou hast come back, I shall get better. Thou shalt make me thy wife when I am quite restored, and then I shall know nothing but happiness." I listened to her with aching heart, and no longer able to conceal my secret, I told her all. It was a fatal revelation. The shock slew her. But before she died, she laid her dying hand on me, and made me vow by the love I bore her that I would avenge her and kill thee for the wrong thou hadst done her. When I had buried her I intended to follow thee and fulfil my vow, but I was press-ganged and sent to the wars again, and bear many a scar of service against the fierce Turk.'

Renaud had grown deadly pale as the recital proceeded, and his face was now literally contorted with shrinking fear. But he managed to stammer out the question:

'And why hast thou come here now?'

'To kill thee!' was the fierce rejoinder.

Renaud staggered and turned livid. The death he would so readily have meted out to others appalled him with nameless terror when turned against himself. He grasped his dagger, but it was with a palsied grasp; then in piteous accents of appeal, he whined:

'Reibell, thou wert once my friend, and though thou mayst be mine enemy now, thou canst not surely desire to take my life. I will give thee wealth and power. Thou hast but to demand what thou wouldst have me do, and I will do it, as it be possible.'

Reibell looked with unutterable scorn on the trembling wretch, and said in a tone of burning contempt:

'I would not touch thy ill-gotten gold lest it cursed me ; and should I fail to fulfil my vow, the ghost of the dead Marie would torture me into madness.'

'But thou saidst a while ago thou wouldst let me escape on some condition,' Renaud moaned, and looking more like a galvanized corpse than a living man.

'I did.'

'Name the condition, then.'

'It is that thou shouldst slay me before I slay thee.' As he spoke he produced a dagger and continued : 'I am no cut-throat, and I will kill thee in fair fight. Thou art armed as I am myself. We will fight a duel to the death.'

'This is madness !' Renaud gasped in horror.

'It may be madness, but there is no way out of it.'

'Will nothing tempt thee?' groaned the unhappy Renaud, as he saw his hopes wither up like a parchment scroll in a fire, and all his evil schemes rising up around him like mocking fiends as death hovered over him.

'Nothing on earth,' said Reibell; with fierce resolution, as turning to the window he swung the bars back, threw the window open, and remarked : 'There is thy way of escape, but thou canst only escape over my dead body.'

Taking advantage of Reibell's movement; when his back was turned the treacherous and craven Renaid made a dash at him and tried to stab him between the shoulders. But so clumsy was he in his excitement that before he could effect his purpose, Reibell had taken the alarm, and turning rapidly, hurled Renaud across the room with a giant's strength.

'Stab-i'-the-dark and pitiable coward !' he hissed fiercely. 'I gave thee a chance for thy life, but thou wouldst have assassinated me, and now thou shalt die an assassin's death !'

Renaud uttered a gasping and piteous cry for mercy, but it passed unheeded. With a ferocity that it would have been difficult to have imagined him capable of, Reibell sprang upon him, and clutching his throat in his iron grip, strangled him to death.

Thus ended Renaud's strange career; thus dissolved away his dreams of greatness; and thus a terrible retribution had come upon him in the noontide of his life. A few years of scheming and reckless indifference to truth and honesty had enabled him to enjoy a brief spell of Court glitter and glare. But for so small a thing he had paid a tremendous penalty,

and his terrible end was a bitter commentary on the uselessness of human aspirations when undirected by a conscientious regard for the rights of others. He and his rival, the Earl of Bothwell, had, so to speak, run their careers together. Each hated the other with an intensity of hatred almost indescribable. Each longed to encompass the other's death and ruin; but Chance and Fate had prevented this, though one lay dead now, and the other was a fugitive against whom the execrations of an embittered and exasperated nation were directed.

Having committed the deed, Reibell rose, and for some moments contemplated his victim, whose face was awful in its expression of frozen horror. If ever a man died a craven's death, that man was Renaud. Reibell spurned the body with his foot. Then he lifted it up with comparatively little effort, for he had the strength of a giant. He threw it across his shoulder, and lifting the bar of the door and shooting back the bolts, he walked down the corridor and gained the courtyard, where dead men lay in their blood, and living men fierce with passion and wine fought like wolves for the possession of spoil. And over the strange and sickening scene, the lurid glare of flickering flames cast their glow, for part of the castle was on fire. Reibell stood for a moment, then with both hands he held Renaud's corpse above his head for a brief instant, and hurled it down into the courtyard like carrion.

'My vow is fulfilled,' he murmured; 'my mission is ended, and Marie Jael is revenged!'

CHAPTER LXX.

RETRIBUTION.

FRANÇOIS, on being rebuked—for rebuke it was—by Jacques, set off with some of his friends to explore the castle in search of Adrienne. Excited and filled with passion, they rushed from room to room, and many of them, giving vent to their fury, wilfully and stupidly destroyed whatever they could lay their hands on. But this did not find Adrienne, and François became almost distracted as he thought that she had either been carried away or had fallen a victim to Renaud's cruelty.

In vain did he search and cry aloud her name, until it was echoed and re-echoed again by the stone corridors. Still there was no trace of the missing lady. At last he came to a door that was fastened. Summoning his followers, they battered it in, and in the room they found half a dozen of the domestics huddled together, and almost paralyzed with fright. They had taken refuge here when the attacking force had gained entrance into the castle, and they had been afraid to stir since. Amongst them was Helen Macdonald, and she was the greatest coward of them all.

‘Where is the lady whom your tyrant master held captive?’ cried François. ‘Speak the truth, or, by the Virgin, you shall all be burned alive.’

At this threat there was a chorus of whining and yelling, but in a few moments Helen mustered sufficient courage to speak, and said :

‘Spare us, good master, spare us, and thou shalt know. The good lady, than whom a sweeter never lived, is in the dungeon, whither my Lord of Hawksvale conveyed her when the castle was attacked.’

‘Lead the way to the dungeon instantly, hag, an thou wouldst preserve thy useless life,’ cried François furiously, and menacing her with his sword.

Trembling and ashen with fear, the wretched woman did as she was ordered, first begging for permission to light a torch, as the dungeon was dark. Then, followed by the clamouring and excited men, with François at their head, she guided them to the dungeon. But the door was found locked, as might have been expected, and Helen said she would go in search of the ‘master’ and get the key ; François, however, pushed her roughly on one side, and seizing a hackbut from one of his followers, he rained a shower of blows on the door ; but he might as well have battered the solid stone wall.

‘A ram, a ram!’ he cried.

Instantly some of the others rushed away, while François, in his feverish impatience, continued to hack the door, but producing no other effect than that of exhausting his strength. In a few minutes his companions returned carrying a massive beam which they had discovered in the courtyard. By their united efforts this was brought into requisition as a battering ram, and beneath its ponderous strokes the door was splintered. Then François snatched the torch from the trembling hands

of Helen, and passing through the aperture, he held the torch aloft, and by its glare he discovered the inanimate form of Adrienne prone on the ground.

Dashing the torch down with a cry of despair, he raised her, and bore her out. She was perfectly unconscious, and white as marble and cold as clay, but limp, showing that life was not extinct. Bearing her in his arms as if she had been the lightest of burdens, for excitement lent him abnormal strength, François hurried into the open air, and thence he carried her to one of the chambers in the castle and laid her on the couch. A few of his comrades had followed out of curiosity, while the others had gone off in search of further adventure, and to join in the orgie and the sacking that were being carried out; for the vintner's cellar had been forced, and maddened with wine and cognac the men were behaving more like savage animals. They slew everyone of the defenders they could catch, and property of value that they could not appropriate they wantonly destroyed. Part of the castle was already in flames, which, unless checked, threatened to reduce the whole pile of buildings to ashes.

'Where is that woman?' François demanded. One of his companions turned to go in search of Helen, but she, deeming that near François was the safest place, had followed, and stood trembling on the threshold of the door. 'Use thy woman's skill to restore this unfortunate lady,' he said fiercely. 'Shouldst thou fail, I'll hang thee up by the armpits and light a fire under thee.'

Notwithstanding that she was almost overcome by deadly fear, and ready to drop, Helen proceeded to give attention to the insensible Adrienne.

'Look well to her,' said François. 'In a few minutes I shall return, and woe to thee if she has not recovered her senses.'

He had allowed his excitement and anger to run away with his reason, and being seized with the spirit of destruction that animated the others, he could scarcely control himself. But his craving to destroy tended not towards inanimate objects, it was directed against Renaud and Jacques. With Renaud he had a long reckoning to settle, and he felt that he could not rest, could not contain himself, until he had exacted the full measure of revenge; while with Jacques he was so exasperated that he would have slain him without any hesitation.

'This expedition is mine,' he thought, 'and Jacques is but an adventurer. By what right, therefore, has he dared to thwart me at the very moment when triumph seemed about to crown my effort? The further outrage inflicted on Adrienne de Bois, and the jeopardy that her life is now placed in, demand a terrible reckoning, but that reckoning will be unpaid so long as the arch knave and impostor Renaud lives.'

With a somewhat reckless youth whose mind was already inflamed, such thoughts as these could only serve to still further arouse him, and the wrongs of his foster-mother made him determined that her wronger should not escape.

He rushed along the corridor intending to get some of his band together, and then hunt Renaud and his protector down; but as he approached the entrance-hall he ran against Jacques. The unexpected rencontre somewhat disconcerted him, but he quickly recovered himself, and drawing his dagger, he sprang upon Jacques, exclaiming:

'Thou art a traitor, and shalt die, since thou hast sought to save the life of Renaud, the greatest knave who has ever defiled the earth!'

He had miscalculated his strength and agility, however, in pitting them against Jacques, who, seizing his wrists in a vice-like grip, said hoarsely:

'Fool, art thou bereft of thy senses? I had a motive in saving Renaud from thy fury. I could crush thee now, but thou art a silly youth, and I spare thee.' As he spoke he wrenched the dagger from François's hand, and pushing him away said, 'Restrain thy impetuosity; follow me and I will take thee to Renaud.'

His commanding tone, his dignified manner, and a certain sadness in his voice, exerted an influence over François, who replied, with a feeling that he had somehow made a fool of himself:

'Go on, then, I'll follow.'

Without another word Jacques turned and retraced his steps to the courtyard, and going to the spot where the corpse of Renaud lay, with the look of petrified horror on its stony face, and the glassy eyes staring blankly up to the lurid heavens, he said as he spurned the body with his foot:

'Behold thine enemy!'

'Dead!' ejaculated François in amazement, and instinctively shrinking away from the ghastly object.

'Ay, dead,' responded Jacques mournfully.

'But who has killed him?' stuttered François, scarcely able to speak, so great was his astonishment.

'I killed him,' said Jacques sternly. 'I had an older score to reckon with him than thou hadst. He foully wronged one who was dearer to me than all the world, and when she was dying she exacted from me a solemn pledge that I would avenge her. I accompanied this expedition that I might fulfil my pledge. Behold the evidence that I have done so.'

He again spurned the body with his foot as he uttered the last words, and gazed reproachfully and reprovngly at François, who, overcome by a sense of shame, covered his face with his hands for a moment and seemed greatly moved. Then he dropped on to his knee after the manner of a courtier, and, seizing Jacques's hand, he touched it with his lips, and said:

'Forgive me; I have misjudged thee. I deserve thy reproaches, and will bear with them.'

'Rise,' Jacques replied. 'I have no reproaches. I should have acted as thou hast done had I been in thy place.'

'We will meet anon,' said François, wringing the other's hand warmly. 'I have found my foster-mother, and left her for a moment in the care of one of the female domestics. I will return and remove her to a place of safety, and see thee again.'

'No,' Jacques responded; 'we shall meet no more. My mission is ended. I have nothing further to do save to carry out the other half of my vow, which was to enter a monastery and devote myself to a life of penitence when I had rid the world of this knave. Farewell; while yet thy companions are glutting themselves with carnage and pillage, I would depart. Farewell. Thy way is out into the life and bustle of the world; mine leads me to monastic solitude and seclusion.'

He turned away and passed out of sight before François could recover from his astonishment, or make the slightest effort to stop him. For some moments François stood irresolute, and half inclined to follow the mysterious Jacques and learn more of his history. But he was aroused to the peril that threatened her for whom he had risked so much by dense volumes of black smoke that rolled like clouds before a storm wind across the courtyard. The fire in the wing of the castle was fast gaining ground, and threatened the whole building

with destruction. He glanced down at the dead Renaud, and kicking him, muttered savagely :

‘ Dog, thou hast met the death thou meritedst.’

He turned away and hurried to the apartment where he had left Adrienne. She had recovered consciousness, under Helen’s care, and she uttered a cry of joy as François entered—a cry that he echoed, and as he threw his arms about her and embraced her, he exclaimed :

‘ Dearest mother, thou art saved. Thy persecutor, and our enemy, Renaud, has gone to his account, and his castle has been given to the flames. But come, let us away ; there is not a moment to lose !’

Joy and fear almost overcame Adrienne, and it seemed as if she would swoon again. Her mind was in a state of wild confusion, and she almost fancied that she was the victim of some nightmare. She remembered that Renaud had thrown her into the dungeon, but from that moment there was a blank, and now she beheld her foster-son, and was told that Renaud was dead, and his castle in flames. No wonder that she was speechless with bewilderment. In a dreamy way she made an effort to rise from the couch, but she was too weak, and fell back again.

Without a moment’s hesitation François seized her in his arms and carried her out. He staggered with his burden to the courtyard, that was filled with masses of dense smoke, tinged to lurid redness by the flames, which, fanned by a high wind, were roaring like a blast furnace. Through the blood-red smoke could be seen the dead bodies that lay about on the ground ; and two or three wounded men, unable to crawl away, and moaning piteously, added to the ghastly weirdness of the scene. High over head the flames leaped as if in fiendish glee, sending up myriads of sparks, which, scattered and carried by the wind, fell like a rain of fire. Men, frantic with drink and excitement, were rushing about like madmen, with no aim or purpose ; while others, laden with plunder, struggled along, leaving as they went a trail of things in their wake. So complete had been the wanton destruction that furniture had been flung out and smashed into fragments, while pictures had been ripped into shreds, and ruin was everywhere.

Speechless with horror, Adrienne clung frantically to François, who, tottering like a drunken man, and almost overcome by the dense smoke, struggled along with his burden,

picking his way as best he could amongst the dead bodies and heaps of débris of what but a short hour ago had been valuable property. He found his way to the gate of the castle, and staggered across the drawbridge. When he had gained the other side of the moat he was overcome, and was compelled to put Adrienne down. Fright and suffering had produced hysteric mania, and she was raving. Almost distracted himself, he left her on the grass while he went in search of a horse. He had not gone many yards when he met some of his companions.

'We give thee greetings, Master François,' they said joyfully.

'My foster-mother is ill, nigh unto death,' he cried. 'Get me a horse, for the love of Heaven!'

Some horses were tethered not far off to the trees, and one was speedily brought. Then François lifted Adrienne to the saddle, and mounted behind her. She was helpless as a child, and he had to hold her tightly in his arms.

'Whither goest thou, good François?' asked one of his friends.

'To Berwick, to place my foster-mother in safety. Were it not for her sake, I would not leave you. Look to yourselves, and Heaven preserve you.'

He put his horse to the gallop, casting a look back at the blazing castle. In a few moments he reined in his steed, for a man had stepped suddenly out from a clump of trees. It was one of the band, and recognising François, he said :

'Hail, good François ! But we have been badly treated, for we have enjoyed none of the fun that has been going on there,' pointing to the castle.

'What hast thou been doing, then ?' François asked.

'My comrade and I have been keeping watch and ward over the prisoner we took this morning.'

'Thou meanest Bastian ?'

'Ay, he tells us that is his name !'

'Where is he now ?'

'Still lashed to the tree as he was when the castle was attacked.'

'Kill him ! kill him !' cried François, 'for he is a reptile. I go to place this unfortunate lady in safety.' Once more he urged his horse into a gallop, and was soon out of sight.

Then the man rejoined his companion, and told him what François had said.

Bastian, writhing with pain, and his ugly face contorted with

fury, was fastened firmly to the trunk of a pine-tree, and so tightly had the cords been lashed around him that they had cut into his flesh.

The two men who had kept guard over him were only too glad to be relieved of their responsibility, and one of them said mockingly :

‘Thy time has come, sweet youth. We have orders to kill thee !’

A look of unutterable fear came into the wretched Bastian’s face as this was said, and he made a piteous appeal for mercy.

‘Wherefore shouldst thou kill me?’ he exclaimed. ‘How and in what way have I injured thee?’

‘Thou wouldst have killed us an thou hadst the chance,’ growled the man who had spoken to François.

‘Nay, I vow that thou art in error, friend,’ whined Bastian. ‘I did but come out to try and seize one François, who is the veriest knave living. Therefore spare me, sweet sir.’

‘Thou liest, thou poltroon,’ exclaimed the other soldier angrily. ‘Say thy prayers, for thy hour has come.’

The man, who was armed with a caliver, raised it as he spoke and examined the priming, whereat Bastian’s eyes almost started from his head with terror, and he uttered such a shrill, piercing shriek that it reverberated through the forest with a startling echo. The next instant the man put his caliver to his shoulder, and, taking deliberate aim, fired, shattering Bastian’s skull and blowing his brains out. The lifeless body, still held by the ropes to the trunk of the tree, presented such a ghastly spectacle that the two men themselves turned away horrified, and rushed off to join their friends in completing the ruin and razing of Hawksvale Castle, and Bastian’s remains were destined to hang there for many and many a long day, until the rope, rotten with wet and exposure, gave way, and allowed the fleshless bones to crumble in a heap on the ground, where they were gradually buried out of sight by the falling leaves. So perished the master and man; both of them in the full vigour and robustness of life, but both of them such unscrupulous knaves that the terrible retribution that befell them was truly merited.

The castle of Hawksvale was completely razed to the ground, and the body of the first and last Earl of Hawksvale was consumed by the burning beams that fell into the courtyard. For long years the blackened ruins stood

ghostly and spectral in their loneliness. The spot came to be regarded as haunted, and it was shunned like a pestilence. Gradually the ruins crumbled down, and the kindly grass and wild flowers in the fulness of time converted them into a green mound, and hid away for ever from human ken every trace of the stronghold of Hawksvale and its knavish and recreant earl.

CHAPTER LXXI.

IN THE WOOF WERE WOVEN LIGHTS AND SHADES.

FRANÇOIS pursued his way to Berwick with the half-unconscious, and as he thought, dying Adrienne de Bois. It was a terrible, nightmare sort of journey, during which his mind was haunted with vague fears, and he suffered from almost unbearable mental distress. The dreadful thought that his foster-mother would die on the road filled him with the wildest alarm. Occasionally he had to stop and rest at roadside hostelries or lonely farms, and naturally he became an object of wonder and suspicion. Utterly prostrated and speechless, Adrienne was unable to give any explanation, and he was consequently suspected of bearing her off against her will. At one place the people tried to detain him, and he only got away by strategy.

So on he went on his weary journey, straining his eyes eagerly for Berwick, 'where,' he thought, 'my sweet foster-mother will be cared for by the man she loves, and will find in Basile a comfort and a treasure. For all the care thou hast bestowed on me, Basile, I have given thee a wife, and henceforth I follow the Queen's fortunes, or fling myself away in the wars.'

At last, when it seemed as if his strength of mind and body could hold out no longer, he rode slowly with his burden into the town of Berwick. He had timed himself to reach his destination as the shades of evening were deepening, so that he might not attract attention. Adrienne had begun to show alarming symptoms, and rambled incoherently. It was evident she was in a raging fever, and he heaved a great sigh of relief as he reined in his jaded horse before the hospitable door of a hostel, where for the present he resolved to lodge Adrienne, until he could make other arrangements. She was received by kindly hands, and it was at once seen that she was in a dangerous

condition from brain fever. The suffering and persecution she had endured, added to the excitement and fright, had told upon her, and thrown her into a serious illness. When François had seen her well bestowed, and had procured a nurse and a leech, he set off in search of Basile; but as the magnet turns to the pole, so he turned first of all to the house of old Bomcester, where, when he received the last news, Lilian was still living with dear Aunt Julie. He would scarcely have been a youth and a lover if, after his prolonged absence, and the dangers he had gone through, he had not thought of her who held his heart. For though he had almost entirely abandoned hope of ever obtaining her, his heart was with Lilian, as it ever would be.

He resolved upon going boldly to the house, trusting that the old fanatic was still in Edinburgh, so that he might be able to obtain an interview with his lady love. It was with somewhat conflicting emotions, and even with misgivings, that he approached the portals of Bomcester's residence and inquired for Aunt Julie. He was admitted by an old domestic, who was a stranger to him, and, after some parleying, she led him to the reception-room, while she went in search of her mistress. He waited so long that suspense had become almost unbearable, and his patience had well-nigh reached its extremest limit. But at last Aunt Julie presented herself, looking a little scraggier, a little soured, and with the inevitable Bible still under her arm.

'Verily, the ways of the Lord are marvellous!' she ejaculated in surprise. 'Thou comest like one from the tomb. We have had rumours of thee, and they were that thou hadst been killed; and next, that thou were ta'en prisoner with the Queen's Majesty.'

'Her Majesty a prisoner?' he cried, fairly staggering as if from a blow, so startling was the news.

'Why, boy, art thou daft? or hast thou really been buried and come to life again? Surely one or the other, since thou knowest not the news that all the land is ringing with.'

'The Queen a prisoner!' he could only repeat, in dazed and sorrowful amazement.

'Ay, by my faith! Have thy wits left thee? or hast thou been in some heathen country, where news travellet not?'

'Good Julie, chide me not,' he said piteously. 'For many days I have been absent from the capital, and engaged in rescuing my dear foster-mother from the hands of a knave.'

But tell me all the news. Sayest thou the Queen is a prisoner? Nay, it cannot be true. They would not dare to lay their hands upon her sacred person.'

'Thou art an unbeliever,' exclaimed Aunt Julie haughtily, as though she was a little offended that her word had been doubted. 'The Lord is mighty and just, and scattereth His enemies, and the Queen has fallen before His wrath. The nobles have taken the crown from her head, and imprisoned her in Lochleven Castle.'

'Alas! alas! poor Queen!' François moaned in such distressful tones that Aunt Julie was touched, and, going to him, she smoothed his curly hair with her skinny fingers, and said soothingly:

'Sweet boy, sweet boy, though thou art a heretic, thou art to be pitied! Thou wert ever faithful to the Queen, but she will be a queen no longer, and can give thee no recompense. But hast thou no inquiry for one to whom thou swore lover's oaths?'

'Thou meanest Lilian,' he said sadly. 'Tell me of her, good Julie, for my weary heart hungers for news.'

'She goes well, and I will tell thee this in confidence, I have sometimes detected her in sighs—sighs for thee.'

'Sayest thou so?' he cried joyfully.

'By my faith, but thy groans have soon turned to smiles!' Aunt Julie remarked.

'Nay, mock me not, I pray thee, and keep me not in torture. Thou knowest well that joy and sorrow are woven in a piece, and while I can weep for my fallen Queen, I can rejoice at the news that my sweetheart loves me still. Go on, Aunt Julie. Tell me more, I beseech.'

'Nay, I have little but what is bad to tell thee,' Julie remarked, with a long-drawn sigh that resembled the wind whistling among withered rushes. 'My poor brother lies sick unto death.' She paused to wipe away an imaginary tear, and then she added, with another sigh, but which was more suggestive of a feeling of delight: 'The Lord's will be done. We are but instruments in His hands. An it pleaseth Him to take my dear brother I shall resign myself to the parting, though in truth it will be a sore blow, a sore blow.' She whisked away several imaginary tears this time, and groaned a rusty groan that almost brought a smile to François's lips.

'Where is thy brother lying?' he asked.

'Where else should he lie but here, and be under my care? He fell ill in Edinburgh after the Queen was brought back from Borthwick, and feeling that his end was drawing nigh he travelled slowly here. He hath often asked about thee. Nay, I vow that I am jealous, for he concerns himself more about thee than me.'

François took the skinny hand of the old woman between his own, and, patting it coaxingly, said:

'Be not jealous, dear Aunt Julie. Thy brother hath but little love for me. But canst thou not show that thou at least hast no hate by letting me have a glimpse of Lilian's sweet face?'

'Thou art a wicked rogue,' returned Aunt Julie, displaying a tendency to fall into his arms. 'Where didst thou learn thy wheedling ways? I vow thou art irresistible. Thou shalt have a glimpse of the maiden's face. In truth, it is a sweet face, and I marvel not that thou shouldst love it. Bide thee here with patience, and I will bring her to thee, and inform my brother thou art arrived.'

'Nay, Aunt Julie,' he exclaimed quickly, 'would it not be better that thou shouldst not disturb thy brother. Let me have but one quiet interview with Lilian, to say farewell for ever.'

'And whither goest thou?' exclaimed the old woman with amazement.

'I go to follow the Queen. An she is a prisoner, so will I be also,' he replied.

'Thy fidelity deserveth a rich reward,' Aunt Julie returned. 'Thou shalt see Lilian anon, even though it be but to say farewell.' She hobbled out of the room, leaving him agitated and excited, and wondering what all this was tending to and what his future would be.

A quarter of an hour passed, though it seemed to him a long, dreary and heavy hour. Then the door was gently opened, and the angular head and shoulders of Aunt Julie presented themselves, and in a few moments the rest of her body came in view, while behind her was Lilian, looking more beautiful than ever, if that were possible, in spite of an expression of care and anxiety that clouded her sweet face. She moved forward with a modest downcast look, and François, waiving all ceremony, sprang towards her and enfolded her in his arms.

'Marry, but thou art a forward youth,' cried Aunt Julie with

affected indignation ; ‘ and as for thee, minx, thou art wanting in maidenly bashfulness. I vow that when I was thy age I rushed not so into a young man’s arms.’

The sweet creature might as well have chided the air, for the young couple heeded her not. In that moment of their reunion they were oblivious of all surroundings. But presently, when the first transports were over, Lilian said :

‘ Nay, auntie, be not severe. Let me enjoy one glint of sunshine in my generally sunless life.’

‘ Ah, well,’ sighed auntie, as if to herself, ‘ thou art a woman and must e’en do as women do.’ Then, speaking more loudly, she added, ‘ But be careful, child ; men are deceivers all. They toy with a woman’s heart only to break it. Heigho ! mine was broken very early.’

‘ Poor dear auntie !’ said Lilian, scarcely able to restrain a smile, ‘ I thought that thy heart had been too tough to fall a prey to man’s deception.’

‘ Go to, thou jade, thou dost but mock me,’ cried Aunt Julie, waving her off with a stately flourish of her bony, mittened arms. ‘ But get thy billing and cooing done quickly. I will to thy father, and return within a quarter of an hour to dismiss that bold and saucy youth.’ She sailed out of the room, much to the gratification of the lovers, who spent the next few minutes in speechless caresses.

If François had even for a single moment doubted that Lilian loved him, all doubt must have vanished now, as, overcome with a sense of delicious pleasure, she laid her head on his breast, and allowed him to encircle her waist with his arms, and press warm kisses on her upturned face. But feelings found words at last, and they told their love as lovers have ever told it, and very briefly and hurriedly François recounted his adventures since last he parted from her. And when he had finished she said :

‘ Poor François ; thou hast suffered much, and the loss of thy friend Basile must have sorely pained thee.’

‘ The loss of Basile !’ he cried, starting in alarm. ‘ What dost thou mean ?’ he asked in breathless agitation.

She in turn felt alarmed, as she saw that he was in ignorance of what she alluded to, and it was only on his pressing her for explanation that she said :

‘ I am sorry I should be the first to tell thee, but it must be told. Poor Basile’s body was found in the river, and they say

that he killed himself through unrequited love; for at his lodgings he had left a paper on which was written, "*Adrienne, I die for thee.*" And yet they say that men have no hearts,' she added with a gentle sigh.

It was a terrible shock to François; it affected him deeply, and covering his face with his hands, he gave way to emotion that found vent in tears.

'Poor Basile! poor Basile!' he moaned. 'In thee I have lost the truest friend I ever had. But wherefore didst thou drown thyself?—for my foster-mother loved thee! Alas! it is one more crime to be added to the list of many which the knave Renaud was guilty of. And with thee dies the secret of my birth, and I can never hope now to learn who I am, or aught of the father who begot me.' Then suddenly he turned to Lilian and exclaimed, 'Lilian, I am but an outcast, a something to be despised, and am unworthy of thee.'

'Thou ratest thyself too severely,' was her gentle answer, as she twined her arms about his neck to comfort him.

'Odds bodkins!' exclaimed Aunt Julie, entering at the moment. 'Hast thou no shame, child, that thou canst embrace that silly youth in such a fashion? Come, thy father wishes thy presence. Get thee gone, young man, for the hour grows late; and I am charged by my brother to tell thee that to-morrow night, at eight o' the clock, thou canst come to his chamber, and he will give thee some good advice.'

Once more embracing Lilian, and even kissing the parchment cheek of Aunt Julie, much to that dear soul's amazement and delight, notwithstanding that she exclaimed in tones of injured virtue, 'Was there ever such impertinence?' François took his departure, his brain in a whirl, and joy and sorrow struggling for the mastery.

He hurried back to the hotel, where he learned that his foster-mother was very ill and delirious. He passed the night in broken and feverish sleep, filled with fantastic dreams, and whenever he awoke it was to see in imagination, in the darkness of his room, the dear form of Lilian, and the drooping body of poor drowned Basile; and ever in his brain, as he dozed off again, ran the pitying thought, 'Why didst thou drown thyself?—for Adrienne loved thee.'

The following day was scarcely less weary than the night had been. The hours seemed leaden-weighted, and spiritless and restless he wandered from place to place, learning from the

gossips all the details of Basile's death, and of the Queen's imprisonment by her subjects. At one moment there came upon him a strong impulse to rush off to Edinburgh and offer his services to the captive Queen; and the next the voice of love cried out, 'Stay,' and the voice of duty, 'Thy foster-mother needs thee.' So he alternated throughout the day, until night brought him some relief, and as eight was chiming by the bells he found himself at Bomcester's house, and without seeing either Aunt Julie or Lilian he was ushered by the domestic into the old man's bedchamber. Bomcester was propped up with pillows in a great chair. His hair had become snowy white, and his unkempt and grizzled beard added to the ghastliness of his face, which was sunken and haggard with pain and disease, while his eyes seemed to glow with an unnatural light.

'I give thee greeting, young man,' he said in a hollow, husky voice. 'I have prayed to the Lord to send thee to me before I died, and He has answered my prayer. The sands of my life run rapidly out, and I am about to enter into my eternal rest. I am glad that it is so, for I am weary. Life is a passion and a disease, and death is the cure.'

A fit of painful coughing deprived him of breath, and it was some time before he recovered sufficiently to proceed. When he could again speak, it was obvious the attack had left him weaker.

'Listen,' he said. 'Thou hast professed love for my child; and since thou hast rendered me some service and saved me once from the fury of Bothwell's brutal soldiers, I would mark my sense of thy conduct by giving thee Lilian for thy wife'—François's heart quickened its beats, and his breath came in jerks—'but thou must choose between her and the Queen. Thou art aware that her Majesty has fallen, and I predict she will never rise again. The Lord's wrath has beaten her down, as it will beat down all those who do evil and cling to her idolatrous faith. Turn from the wrath therefore. Embrace the new faith, and I will give thee a fortune and my child.'

He paused, and fixed his burning eyes on the youth's face to watch the effect of his speech. François endured a terrible struggle with himself, for he knew now that the moment had come when he must declare for love or Queen. But at last the conviction came upon him that his duty to the Queen had ended. She was a captive in the hands of her enemies, and

how could he, a friendless, powerless youth, hope to be of any service to her now? So love conquered, and bowing his head as if he still felt a sense of shame, he said :

‘I accept the conditions, for love’s sake.’

A look of triumphant joy lighted up the fanatic’s pallid features, and stretching forth his trembling hand, he dragged a small-wheeled table, on which lay a large open Bible, nearer to him, and exclaimed in breathless tones :

‘Come hither. Lay thy hand upon this blessed book, and say as I say. “By this holy book I swear to embrace the reformed faith, to be a good and staunch Protestant, and sustain and uphold the new doctrine in the face of persecution and trials, let them be ever so heavy ; and I further swear to be a loyal and true and faithful loving husband to Lilian Bomcester, as I hope for God’s mercy.”’

François repeated the words in a clear and distinct voice, and when he had finished, the old man seized his hand and cried :

‘I have brought thee into the fold. The Lord watch over thee. I greet thee as my son.’ Overcome by the effort he had made, he sank back exhausted and gasped for breath, but presently he muttered in broken sentences: ‘Go—go—I have finished. We shall meet no more on this side of the grave. My fortune and Lilian are thine. Use them well. Farewell, farewell.’

François turned away and left the chamber, feeling like one who walked in a dream. He fain would have sought Lilian then, but the old domestic met him on the stairs and showed him to the door, and he, being like one who was swayed by an influence which had thoroughly subjected him, uttered no word, but passed out into the dark street, and wandered down to where the many-voiced sea was sounding hoarsely. There, baring his heated brow to the cold, salt breezes, he sat down to collect his scattered thoughts and calm his agitated mind.

François never saw Bomcester again, for in two days from that eventful night the old fanatic lay dead. And more than three weeks passed before he was once more permitted to clasp his affianced wife to his breast, as, in the early days of her sorrow for her father’s death, Lilian secluded herself ; for, strange and eccentric as he was, she was devotedly attached to him.

During those three weeks François devoted himself to his

foster-mother, watching and tending her with all the solicitude of a dutiful and affectionate son. When she was convalescent, he acquainted her with his good fortune; and after she had congratulated him and chided him greatly for renouncing the faith in which he had been brought up, she inquired for news of Basile. Then, with heavy heart, he told her what had occurred. The news fell with cruel force upon her, and it was some time before she was able to express her thoughts:

‘Poor Basile!’ she moaned. ‘God rest his soul! In him I have lost one who would have been a tender husband, for he died of love for me, and thou art now an orphan.’

‘An orphan!’ cried François, as the truth suddenly dawned upon him.

‘Ay, an orphan, for Basile was thy father!’

François bowed his head and wept, and in a flood of memory came back all the thousand kindnesses and solitudes that Basile had displayed towards him, and he understood it all now. But the poor Jester’s voice was stilled, his kindly heart cold in the coldness of death; and François could only weep and weep again: for some, sorrow can find no other vent save tears.

Six months later Lilian Bomcester became his wife, and in the new life and new state that opened up before him he found an abiding joy. The shadows of the past would never pass away, but the brightness of the future would soften them.

Aunt Julie did not long survive her brother, while Adrienne de Bois, broken-hearted and weighted with a sense of great weariness, went back to the Queen, and for twenty-two long years shared her cruel captivity, until the shameful tragedy of Fotheringay crushed her; and within a month she had followed her beloved royal mistress to ‘where the wicked cease from troubling and the weary are at rest.’

THE END.

[Nov. 1895.]



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